The Greatest Films Never Seen

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In *Buster Keaton Never Smiles*, Dutch author Arnon Grunberg devotes one of his essays to Martin Scorsese’s documentary on Italian cinema. He argues that Scorsese’s personal voyage through film demonstrates that the films you love, and that arguably help shape your emotional life, could be seen as an ‘autobiography’. I have always felt that to be true. However, I did not realize just how few titles comprise the formative years of my autobiography until I came across a 2016 article in *The New Yorker*, in which Tad Friend claims that the ‘average teenager [...] sees six films a year in the [film] theatre’. I understand that media consumption in general, and cinema-going in particular, has changed tremendously over the last few decades, but this number astonished me, because it is closer to the total amount of films I saw in the cinema as a teenager.

My handful of cinema-going experiences (in addition to a youth spent glued to the television), however, were life-altering: not only did these moving-image experiences make me question the world, myself, and who I wanted to be, but also informed my later professional choices. This preface is the story of the films I was able to see, and perhaps more importantly, the ones I later discovered I could not. This discovery, and some of the reasons why I was unable to access these films, form part of the personal and professional experiences that serve as the background to this book.

‘LET’S START AT THE VERY BEGINNING’

In the autumn of 1994, during one of my first film history classes at the University of Amsterdam, we were shown Peter Delpeut’s *Lyrisch Nitrat* (‘Lyric Nitrate’, 1990). I am quite sure it must have been a fuzzy VHS copy of the

**THE PICTURE IDOL** (US 1912, Dir. James Young)
(courtesy of EYE Film Institute)
film, but I was mesmerized. My previous experience of silent film had been limited to television screenings, and mainly consisted of – with all due respect – Laurel and Hardy. So, ‘studying’ a film that used non-slapstick, ‘lyrical’ silent film footage, woven into a story, was a revelation. Shortly afterwards, I went on a class excursion to Overveen, a beautiful Dutch seaside resort, where the Nederlands Filmmuseum’s nitrate film vaults are located. This visit took place at a time when I fully subscribed to the ‘myth of the archive as a repository of objective truth where documents lay dormant, waiting to be roused’ (Amad, 2010, p. 159); this was where the film had been assembled, and the magical location where the inflammable clips resided.

It was the spectacular final scene of *Lyrisch Nitraat*, in particular, that hit home. In this scene from Edward Warren’s *Warfare of the Flesh* (1917), in which Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden, a flickering pattern of decaying nitrate slowly replaces the photographic image. As a viewer, your attention constantly shifts from the film’s content to its surface as the decaying nitrate obstructs the narrative flow. The photographic images are overtaken by the irreversible process of decay, until the strip of film itself becomes the principal focus. Aside from the ambiguous emotion of enjoying the strange beauty of deteriorating film, the nostalgic sense of a (literally) disappearing cinema touched me deeply. I am only able to compare it to knowing your way around a house that does not exist anymore; watching the film filled me with a somewhat hallucinatory feeling. At some point, films, if they are not preserved, can no longer be seen, and if they cannot be seen, it will become increasingly hard to remember them. The vital force of past cinema will be permanently lost. As I watched Adam and Eve banished from their paradise, I too was expelled from mine.

‘I’LL BE RIGHT HERE’

I ended up working in Overveen, as an archivist. Fortunately, my daily work in the film archive was not always as overwhelming as that first experience. Film preservation is, in the main, entertaining and fulfilling (albeit time-consuming) work, often culminating in a festive, champagne-filled film première. The realization that spending your days in this manner could be considered ‘work’ is still a little mind-boggling. My experience in Overveen involved working alongside highly motivated colleagues with a shared passion for everything film-related. Added to this was the regular excitement of receiving international guests, including academics and (found-footage) filmmakers, who were engaged in fascinating research projects. My ‘work’ also included frequent pilgrimages to Italy – to Le Giornate del Cinema Muto (*Pordenone Silent Film
Mainly, however, I felt privileged to be able to view and engage with material that most people outside of the film archive world would probably never see. Over time, working in an environment where, as Peter Delpeut (1997, p. 7) put it so well, ‘the marginal is the norm’, questions began to creep up on me. What is it that is kept in the (public-sector) film archive? How does this enormous quantity of ‘stuff’ actually end up there? And how does what is kept and safeguarded in the archive relate to textbook film history? I have sensed the wonder and amazement that a few frames of film can elicit, and have happened across many mysterious faces along the way. Indeed, what I encountered in my archival practice had very little to do with the ‘official’ film history I had been taught. The biggest wonder was that I recognized almost none of these works.

‘NOBODY PUTS BABY IN A CORNER’

The relationship between film historiography and film archives, and between the available filmic sources and their ‘potential for history making’ (Jones, 2012, p. 119) in particular, have fascinated me ever since. I pursued these reflections on the practical nature of archival work in the form of an MA in Film Archiving at the University of East Anglia. All elements of the degree, including the production of a creative product incorporating archival material, fostered my growing concern with the question of access to archival film.

An interest in archival access goes hand-in-hand with a desire to discover those factors that facilitate or impede it. There are, of course, issues of funding, language, and culture, as well of formats and technical obsolescence, but it was the legal factors that captured my interest the most. It was in the Brussels chapter of the Archimedia programme, in 1998, that I first came across the topic that would come to dominate my research interests, but it was in the practical archival environment that I really became aware of the intertwined relationship between copyright and access to archival collections.

My internship for the MA was spent in the sales department of the Nederlands Filmmuseum, where I coproduced a DVD entitled, Highlights from the Collections. Due to the nature of its content, rights clearance and a close collaboration with the museum’s legal department played a major role in its production. My thesis centred on a Dutch film, whose release on DVD, it was predicted, would be significantly delayed, as the film’s rights holders could not be traced. Today, the film would be regarded as an ‘orphan work’.

Festival’) in Pordenone and Il Cinema Ritrovato (‘Cinema Rediscovered’) in Bologna – where it took on an international perspective.
‘SHE RESCUES HIM RIGHT BACK’

My practical awareness of the burgeoning ‘orphan works problem’ resulted in a PhD research proposal for the Transtechnology Research Group at Plymouth University. Focusing on theoretical research, away from archival practice, provided me with the distance I needed to investigate the intricate relationship between the film archive and copyright. Initially, I thought of copyright as an exclusively restrictive concept. During the course of my research, however, I began to regard it in a subtler fashion as a filter that helps shape access to archival film in ways that both impede and facilitate. The resulting PhD thesis forms the basis of this book, which is partially informed by my theoretical and practical professional experiences.

On a personal level, the book is also the story of my changing relationship with the moving image. It is over 20 years since I first saw *Lyrisch Nitraat*; meanwhile, I have turned into a person who now sees more films in the film theatre than the aforementioned ‘average teenager’. And, of course, the options for viewing films have rapidly expanded. That one particular film, however, still fascinates: over time it has come to mean so many different things to me. Although my PhD research was firmly embedded in an academic context, I also relied on my experience of working inside a national public film archive – *Lyrisch Nitraat*’s wonderfully and provocatively compiled source material has helped me trace my memories of and access to that institute. In the meantime, the ‘myth of the archive as a repository of objective truth’ has evolved, for me, into a firm belief in the archive as a mediator of the past.

This book is a personal interpretation of what it means to think, to create, and to participate in a specific culture, and reminds me of my formative cinema-going years. In writing it, I have gained a deeper understanding of a certain ‘permission culture’, and the meaning of the ever-expanding collection of films I both can and cannot see (and that some recalcitrance goes a long way...).

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