

Archives of the Motion Picture: A General View

By RAYMOND FIELDING

University of Iowa

ALTHOUGH the motion picture is more than 70 years old, only within recent years have really serious attempts been made to record its history systematically. During the early years of the film, little effort was made to acquire and preserve those records, artifacts, and films that were involved in its development. Even today, at a time when the art of the film is being studied in more than 200 American colleges and universities, it is difficult to acquire archival materials in the field. The reasons for this difficulty are numerous, but principal among them is the fact that film makers, unlike workers in the other arts, have never been encouraged to take their art very seriously. Every year, every day, valuable papers, drawings, photographs, and films are destroyed by artists and technicians in the motion picture industry because they do not realize their historical, artistic, or pedagogic value. The job of the archivist is to acquire the remaining materials before they disappear, to make them accessible to film scholars, and to create an environment in which members of the film industry will be encouraged to aid in a program of continuing archival preservation.

THE NATURE OF THE FILM

Of the many ways in which the motion picture can be described, at least five are of real interest to the archivist.

1. *It is an art.* Since it is an art, all the biographical materials that are useful in the study of the other arts are useful in the study of the film, too. Papers, letters, diaries, memos—all provide insights into the personality of the film maker and help reveal the educational, social, political, and psychological elements out of which that personality was fashioned. With respect to particular motion picture productions, these same documents help reveal the intentions of the film artist, the frustrations that he experienced in the realization of his work, and the extent to which the finished products reflect his original schemes.

The author is associate professor in the Division of Television-Radio-Film, University of Iowa, at Iowa City.

2. *It is a corporate art.* "If film is an art, then who is the artist?" Sometimes that is a difficult question to answer. Ordinarily, we consider the director or producer the driving force behind a production. Obviously, however, there are many other artists and workers on a film, without whose contributions a film could not be made. With rare and atypical exceptions, there is no such thing as a one-man film. Even modest films employ half a dozen people behind the camera, and major productions may involve hundreds.

For the archivist this means that the records and materials that document the planning and creation of a film are by no means complete unless they embrace the contributions of all the major workers on the production and show how these workers (writer, cinematographer, art director, costume designer, editor, sound director, music composer, performers, and so forth) helped to reinforce (or, sometimes, compromise) the efforts of the director.

3. *It is a composite art.* The film is the sum total of what it borrows from the other arts—from the graphic, pictorial, and photographic arts; from literature and drama; and from dance, music, and architecture. So closely intertwined is the film with these older arts that even today, after 70 years, critics cannot agree as to the "essential" or "true" nature of the film. What this means for the archivist is that he must cast his acquisition net wide enough to pull in all the diverse materials that these different arts bring to film—scripts and scenarios, costume sketches and set blueprints, production photographs and lighting charts, musical scores and recordings, animation drawings, title designs, and so forth.

4. *It is a business.* The fact that it is a business—and an enormous one—imposes certain burdens upon film makers that do not fall on artists in other fields. One of these is a requirement for tremendous audiences that in the aggregate will return the approximately \$3 million-plus spent on today's average "A"-budget film—a requirement met, in large part, by high-pressure promotion campaigns. As it happens, film production is also a very speculative business, with accounting practices all its own. Because of the enormous cost of a production and the risks involved in its financing, the art of the film can scarcely be considered apart from its economic aspects. Accordingly, the archive that aspires to collections in the area of the motion picture will wish to collect a variety of records providing insights into the financial, labor-management, and promotional affairs that precede, accompany, and follow the artistic realization of a film.

5. *It is a technological art.* No other art form interposes so much technical bric-a-brac between the artist and his audience as does the film. No other requires so long an apprenticeship before its practitioners can communicate through the medium even the most modest sort of message. If the art of the film is to be understood, therefore, so must the equipment and the technical routines involved in its execution. If the history of the film is to be grasped, then so must the technological convolutions that have marked its growth. Many changes in the form, the style, and the emerging potential of the medium have been intimately associated with changes in mechanical, electronic and chemical engineering. The current *cinéma vérité* movement, for example, could not have appeared and flourished without the appearance, within the last decade, of improved high-speed 16mm. emulsions, miniaturized cameras, sound recorders, and other specialized hardware.

Accordingly, archivists will wish to include in their collections a wide variety of technical papers and reports, still photographs, patents, production records, and legal transcripts, which show how technique and technology have affected the growth of the medium.

ACQUISITION GOALS FOR THE MOTION PICTURE ARCHIVE

The foregoing discussion of the nature of the film suggests some kinds of materials that will naturally and properly be collected in a motion picture archive. These include:

1. *Scripts.* Scripts have many forms—everything from the story idea on which a film is based, through the *treatment* (an expansion of the basic story, which may run as long as 100 pages) to the *shooting script*, from which the film is shot on the sound stage. Almost always, of course, the shooting script is revised during production—sometimes from day to day. The multicolored replacement sheets that make up the bulk of a working shooting script are particularly useful to scholars in reconstructing the way in which the final story evolved. Finally, *editorial continuity scripts* record exactly the finished film as it emerges from the editing rooms and goes to the theaters, even to the extent of showing foot-and-frame counts for individual shots.

2. *Still photographs.* In the course of a film production, hundreds or thousands of stills are taken—location scouting shots, posed publicity photographs, on and off-stage “candid,” costume and makeup photo tests, and the so-called production photographs showing the sound-stage crew at work. These photographs are useful to scholars in several ways. They show, for instance, what

kinds of equipment were used during a particular production, how the sets were constructed, who was present on the set (both in front of and behind the camera), what alternatives presented themselves to the director during selection of camera setups, and what kinds of lighting and sound-recording routines were employed by the cinematographer and sound director.

3. *Production records.* As in many other industries, motion picture production stands or falls on its paperwork. The logistical problems involved in bringing a high-priced crew, a high-priced cast, an expensive set, and complicated lighting and sound-recording equipment onto a sound stage (the rental of which alone may run to several thousand dollars a day) are so great that only the most efficient production management will bring a film through to completion. Some of the scores of forms that are used are shooting schedules, camera reports, daily production reports, location schedules, costume and set requisitions, cast and crew calls, "cross-plot charts" (which relate labor, time, space, and material), purchase orders, and receipts.

4. *Labor-management records.* For decades the film industry has been almost completely organized in more or less closed shops by unions and guilds. As in most modern industries, the machinery for negotiating contracts, administering contract provisions, and arbitrating disputes is quite complicated. So are the documents that record them.

5. *Story boards.* Story boards are sheets of sketches drawn within rectangles of the same shape as the motion picture screen. Individual sheets of sketches may be small enough for a typewriter page or large enough to fill half a wall. Although tentative, they help the director and his staff to visualize the action of the script during planning stages.

6. *Art director's sketches.* For each major set, the art director prepares numerous drawings—often quite handsome—which show the set architecture and decoration as he envisions it. All kinds of media are used—charcoal, pen and ink, oils, tempera, and watercolor.

7. *Art director's models.* From the approved preliminary set sketches, the art director prepares models that show the director and his staff what the entire set would look like *if it were real*. This is the only time that a conventional-looking structure, whether interior or exterior, is created. Once production gets underway, the sets used on the sound stage are fragmented into small sections and photographed in different shots that will be edited to produce

the illusion that a complete, continuous, solid, and permanent set existed.

8. *Art director's blueprints.* With sketches and models approved, the art director proceeds to prepare blueprints of elevations and floor plans, which go to the set department for construction. These are usually quite detailed and show explicitly how the set was fabricated.

9. *Costume sketches.* Before the cutting of cloth and sewing of costumes, elaborate sketches are prepared by the costume designer. These not only must suit the personalities of the characters, the mood of the drama, and the period of the story but also must be keyed to the colors, textures, and tonal relationships of the set design and lighting. The sketches are often accompanied by sample swatches of fabric.

10. *Censorship records, correspondence, and memos.* Like other media of communication, the film may be subject to censorship in some cities, States, or countries. This may involve legally sanctioned censorship such as prior restraint or prosecution after the fact. Or, more subtly, it may occur through the coercive influence of private pressure groups. In all cases these influences, where they exist, have profound effects upon the content and style of the motion picture.

11. *Research books.* Often during the planning of a film, research workers will be engaged to authenticate costumes, locales, sets, furniture, and props, as well as the manners, speech patterns, accents, dialects, and personal idiosyncracies of characters who appear in the film. This practice is particularly common in producing historical dramas. In the course of this research, extensive research books are prepared for guidance of the director and his staff. As a rule, these books are heavily illustrated, and they may run to several volumes.

12. *Financial records.* Among the most valuable research resources for film history are account books, legal papers, contracts, and correspondence. These reveal (1) the exact ownership of the film by its many different investors, (2) the methods of financing employed, (3) the projected budgets, (4) the actual cost breakdowns for the finished film, (5) promotional and advertising costs, (6) distribution costs or percentages, (7) gross receipts—both domestic and foreign—and (8) net profits. These financial records are also most difficult to acquire; they are proprietary in nature and are jealously guarded by studios and producers. Still, materials of this sort occasionally become available. Recently, for example, the

University of Iowa acquired complete financial records for 26 feature films produced by Albert J. Cohen at Universal Studios between 1940 and 1956.

13. *Promotional and advertising campaign materials.* These include posters, newspaper advertising layouts, photographs, recordings, feature story matter, film trailers for theaters and TV, and pressbooks.

14. *Clipping files.* These contain reviews, biographical pieces, and news items.

15. *Records of technological innovation.* These comprise patents, court transcripts, depositions, blueprints, laboratory journals.

16. *Business correspondence and interoffice memoranda.*

17. *Personal papers, letters, diaries and scrapbooks.*

THE FILM ARCHIVE

We are concerned, finally, with what is perhaps the most important collection of all—the film itself.

The problems involved in operating a film archive can be formidable. They include (1) the physical difficulties involved in storing and handling motion picture film, as compared with conventional archive materials, (2) the fact that repeated viewings of an archive print will inevitably cause wear and deterioration of that print, and (3) the enormous amount of film produced during the history of the motion picture and available to the archivist—a flood of film whose volume today seems to be increasingly geometrically rather than arithmetically.¹

The problems of selection, for example, can be staggering. Assuming that the archivist has a wide range of titles from which to choose, he simply may not have room and facilities sufficient for their proper handling. A few years ago one of this country's major film archives was given several million feet of historically priceless film by a leading studio that had discontinued its newsreel service. Within a short time, however, the archive was obliged to return the gift. The institution simply could not afford to store the material, let alone index, catalog, and retrieve it.

Solutions to such problems are not easy. Computerization of film libraries will help in certain situations where the commercial demand for prints or footage can justify the rental of computer

¹ According to Thomas Hope of Eastman Kodak, over 10,000 films of a nontheatrical sort alone were produced in 1965. See Thomas Hope, "Market Review: Nontheatrical Film and Audio-Visual—1965," in *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers*, p. 1204, Dec. 1966.

facilities and service. In the operation of a conventional archive, however, in which commercial revenue is not involved, nothing short of massive infusions of money from foundations, State and Federal governmental agencies, and the motion picture industry itself will do much to solve the problems.

Just to complicate matters, all theatrical 35mm. motion pictures produced before 1950 were photographed and printed on nitrate film stock, which is perishable, flammable, and sometimes explosive. In time, chemical stabilizers in the film evaporate; the film begins to crumble, cannot be projected, and finally turns to dust. Already, perhaps as many as a third of all the world's film features produced during the last half century have permanently disappeared. The surviving nitrate prints can be salvaged, of course, by duplicating them on acetate-based film. The laboratory work involved is very expensive, however, and financial support for this kind of work is hard to find. Even acetate-based films also must be properly housed if they are to last. They must be stored in specially designed vaults, with year-round control of temperature and humidity.

To further complicate the film archivist's work, modern mono-pack color emulsions, although they have a long-lasting acetate base, use dyes that in time will fade. If such films are to be permanently preserved, they must be copied onto color-separation black-and-white negatives—a process prohibitively expensive for all but the most valuable films.²

MAJOR MOTION PICTURE ARCHIVES IN THE UNITED STATES

In this article we have reviewed some peculiarities of the film medium and have suggested which archival goals appear legitimate and pressing in view of those peculiarities. We conclude with a list of archives that collect film and/or conventional archival papers in the area of the motion picture.

Federal

Edison National Historic Site. West Orange, N.J.

The Library of Congress (Motion Picture Section). Washington, D.C.

The National Archives (Audiovisual Branch). Washington, D.C.

State

The Mass Communications History Center, State Historical Society of Wisconsin. 816 State St., Madison, Wis.

² For a thoughtful appraisal of the film archivist's problems, see John Flory, "Doomsday for Film: The Crisis in Motion-Picture Archives," in *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers*, p. 410, May 1963.

City

The Theater Collection, New York Public Library. 111 Amsterdam Ave., New York City.

University

University of California, Los Angeles (Department of Theater Arts; Theater Arts Library; Department of Special Collections, Main Library). 405 Hilgard Ave., Los Angeles, Calif.

University of Iowa (Division of TV-Radio-Film; Special Collections Department, Main Library). Iowa City, Iowa.

University of Southern California (Department of Cinema; Doheny Library). University Park, Los Angeles, Calif.

Private

Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. 9038 Melrose Ave., Los Angeles, Calif.

Eastman House. 900 East Ave., Rochester, N.Y.

Museum of Modern Art. 11 West 53d St., New York City.

Computer Archives in the Future

Computer information systems have a potential and flexibility that is so great that the bulk of records of the future will be either computer-stored or computer-generated.

Essentially the archives will contain two types of computer records: duplicates made for security purposes, and stored tapes and information devices withdrawn from computing equipment in order to keep their capacities available for maximum use.

As real-time direct-access equipment is used, it is essential that the archivist participate in deciding what information must be captured and kept for future use. Once information is identified to be saved, then the point at which it is to be captured can be determined. The form of computer-generated records will be dependent upon the nature of the recording media used.

An archives for computer-generated records must be specially designed, fire-resistant, secure from pilferage and animal life and isolated from sources of magnetic fields. Magnetic recordings should not be stored in close proximity to electric generators, wiring, transformers, and similar devices generating fields capable of distorting the magnetic orientation of particles in the recording surface. Use of non-magnetic materials for storage shelves may be necessary.

When the State Library building is modified to add additional stacks, steps must be taken to provide air-conditioning, and proper vault protection for both microfilm and computer-stored records.

—DAVID C. DUNIWAY, State Archivist, in *Oregon State Library Biennial Report for Period July 1, 1964–June 30, 1966*, p. 22.

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