‘The collection of rubbish.’

Animatographs, archives and arguments: London, 1896-97

Stephen Bottomore

‘... the ordinary work of the print-room at the British Museum is quite disorganised by the collection of animated photographs that have been pouring in upon the bewildered officials ... Seriously, does not the collection of rubbish become a trifle absurd?’

Westminster Gazette, 20 February 1897

What and where was the world’s first national film archive? The Cinématèque française? The National Film Archive? The Museum of Modern Art? The answer may be none of these: it may turn out to be, of all places, the British Museum.

It all started as an idea of the British film pioneer, Robert Paul, in 1896. However, partly due to the reluctance of certain British Museum officials and the lack of significant benefits for film donors, the project never took off, and probably only a single film was ever accepted for preservation. Nevertheless, the debate generated over this early effort at preserving films for future generations was interesting, and raised several issues relevant even today to the work of film archives.

It might be argued that there were several early examples of film preservation in official and national archives. The first was on 16 August 1893 when the Library of Congress in Washington received some ‘Edison Kinetoscopic Records’ from W.K.-L.Dickson, possibly including some frames of the dancer, Carmencita1. In France the pioneer filmmaker Eugène Pirou deposited his films of 1896/7 in the Cabinet d’Estampes of the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris2. In November 1897 30 Lumière films were deposited with the Conseil de Prud’hommes de Lyon3, and by this action the films received copyright protection for 5 years. Copyright was the motivation behind the previous two examples too: to protect the films, or the technical process of making the films, against copying by others. For this reason the films in France and the USA were deposited in a form not designed for projection: as a few sample frames or as paper prints.

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But Robert Paul’s proposal was different: he wanted to preserve entire, projectable films for viewing by future generations, for posterity. There had been suggestions for doing this almost as soon as the cinema was invented by writers including Boleslaw Matuszewski, but Paul’s appears to be the first concrete proposal for film archiving. It all began on 21 July 1896 when Paul wrote to the British Museum concerning ‘Animated Photos of London Life’. The British Museum register of letters gives no further details and the letter itself has not survived, but from Paul’s subsequent letter to the press we know a fair amount about his offer. Paul was proposing that several of his actuality films be preserved in the Museum. The films (or ‘animatographs’) he mentions are: The Wedding of Princess Maud, The Prince’s Derby, Henley Regatta, Scenes of London Life and various ‘animated photographs of well-known individuals’. A film of ‘a member of the Royal Family laying a foundation stone’ may also have been offered.

Paul explains more about his offer in a fascinating article entitled, ‘For the benefit of Posterity: Animatographs at the British Museum’, published in the Daily Chronicle in December 1896. Several of the themes dealt with in the article – storage conditions, access and print lifetime – have interesting parallels in the world of film archives today. For example, how does Paul suggest that the films should be stored?

‘He proposes to place each film in a sealed red glass vessel so that if exposed [to the light] there would be no danger of the photograph fading; enclose this in a cast-iron or brass tube, with a screw, so that the whole thing should be air-tight, and engrave the name of the scene on the outside of the tube’.

Paul suggested that within the glass tubes ‘the films will be packed in asbestos …?’ presumably as a protection against their combustion, for, when asked if the films would ‘last for ever’, Paul replied:

‘“They are not very perishable, at all events, except by fire. Celluloid is the stuff they are made by, and as you see”, said Mr. Paul, applying a match to a portion of “The Prince’s Derby”, “it burns almost with an explosion. But of course in the way in which I propose to preserve them there would be no danger of their being set on fire. I don’t know what might happen to them in the course of a century or so. The substance shrinks a little, but I have arranged a machine which will allow for that”’.

What about arrangements for viewing of the films by the public? Though Paul was apparently ‘also prepared to present one of the most improved machines by which the photographs are displayed’, there would be limits:

‘“Of course”, said Mr. Paul, “the disadvantage of the whole thing is that you cannot constantly show them to the public, but, at any rate, they would supply an interesting record of current events”’.

Despite the interest in his scheme from the press, Paul received no reply from the British Museum to his July letter for the rest of 1896. What could the reason be for this delay? Paul himself pointed out that any reluctance should not be on grounds of the storage space required: ‘The films, as you see, are not bulky, scarcely larger than a reel of cotton’. If it turned out that the British Museum wouldn’t finally take them, Paul was planning to offer the films to the South Kensington Museum (today the Science Museum), ‘but as the former is more of a place for permanent records I would rather see them there’.

Someone then suggested that the films should be sent to the Royal Photographic Society. But the Photographic News sniffily responded to this: ‘Does our contemporary imagine the Society to exist for the purpose of housing photographs that other institutions reject?’

But the British Museum had not rejected Paul’s offer. Some initial reluctance may have been due to the films having ‘a knock of shrivelling, and so spoiling the appearance of the photographs’, but it seems that the delay in a decision was largely caused by discussions taking place on a problem of classification which the films presented:

‘... up to the present the authorities have not been able to decide to which particular department of the museum such records properly belong. The head of each department is quite sure that they don’t belong to his, but is loath
to offer any suggestion as to the others. Perhaps a new department will have to be created ...". Another journal revealed that, though Paul's initial offer had been greeted 'with delight' by the Museum authorities, thereafter total confusion reigned:

'The film was neither a print nor a book, nor – in fact, everybody could say what it was not; but nobody could say what it was. The scheme was not exactly pigeonholed. The real trouble was that nobody could say to which particular pigeonhole it belonged'

But the Museum finally decided which department should take the films. On 29 January 1897 Paul wrote to remind them of his offer of 'a Series of Animated Photographic Records of Current Events, hermetically sealed for future use', and the next day he was informed that his offer was under consideration by the Department of Prints and Drawings.

On 3 or 4 February Paul received a letter from the Keeper of this Department, Mr. Sidney Colvin, to say:

'With reference to your kind offer of a series of animated photographic records, hermetically sealed for future use, we have been in some difficulty, inasmuch as the productions themselves, being of a wholly new character, it was not clear to which department of the Museum they should be assigned. Rather, however, than let the proposed gift go astray, I am prepared to recommend to the trustees that it be accepted for this department. Will you be so good as to let me know approximately the dimensions of the case containing the rolls, and further to acquaint me with the conditions which you desire should regulate their custody and eventual use? As soon as I hear from you on the above points, I shall have the pleasure of preparing a report recommending the acceptance of the gift by the trustees.'
On 13 February Paul presented to the Department of Prints and Drawings an 'animatographie cylinder, representing the Derby, won by the Prince of Wales in 1896 with Persimmon'. This would therefore seem to be the first film ever to be archived.

If one is to believe the press, the project now took off in a big way, but with little enthusiasm from the British Museum staff. An amusing article in the *Westminster Gazette* on 20 February 1897 cited a 'rumour' that:

'... the ordinary work of the print-room at the British Museum is quite disorganized by the collection of animated photographs that have been pouring in upon the bewildered officials. Mr. Sidney Colvin, the head of the department, sulks in his room like Achilles in his tent, the degradation of the room consecrated to Dürer, Rembrandt and the other masters ... is more than his soul can bear, while his subordinates, with hearts full to choking, unwillingly catalogue 'The Prince's Derby', 'The Beach at Brighton', 'The Buses of Whitehall', and the other attractive scenes that delight the great heart of the music-hall public. There is a still more awful prospect looming ahead; it is feared that every town and village with a spark of local patriotism that in this year of grace will celebrate her Majesty's Great Jubilee will send a full series of photographs of its local festivities in honour of that event. Seriously, does not the collection of rubbish become a trifle absurd?'

As it says, this tale may be largely rumour, but the attitude of Colvin is plausible. Sidney Colvin (1845–1927) was a distinguished art critic, former Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge, and, for nearly thirty years, head of the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum. One colleague said of him that he had 'deep feelings, strong affections and antipathies' and Colvin hated having to accept in the Museum 'the tedious uninspired output of scores and hundreds of mechanical plodders'. He loved the old masters and was hostile toward modern art forms like cubism and futurism – 'the daubings of incompetence or imposture' – and hoped that in future such works wouldn't be accepted in 'the hall of fame' (i.e. the British Museum) and 'will fling themselves against these doors in vain and drop, unregarded, poor ephemera, into the void'. These are hardly the words of a neutral archivist, if such an animal exists, though it does not follow from this attitude to art that Colvin would have been opposed to collecting new artifacts like film. Indeed, the Museum in general had rather an enlightened attitude to new technologies, such as photography, using this medium as early as 1853 to record artifacts, and developing a new type of camera in 1895 for photographing circular objects. Three years later photographs were being collected – eventually over 3,000 of them – for a National Photographic Record and Survey, and in 1906 gramophone records started to be collected.

But films might well have been seen by Colvin and others as a very different kettle of fish. Firstly, as Paul himself pointed out, they were highly flammable. In May 1897 a devastating fire in Paris, started by a film projector led to the deaths of scores of the French nobility. The London County Council and insurance companies started to introduce celluloid fire regulations by 1898. Films were perceived as dangerous, and such a fire risk would surely have deterred any national archive from collecting them at this time. Furthermore, from the beginnings, films were shown in low class venues like fairgrounds and music halls, and, as early as 1896, risqué titles like *Bain de la Parisienne* and *Coucher de la mariée* were on the market. Thus on grounds of both danger and morality, films were not seen as a neutral commodity, and many, like Colvin, may have wished that they would indeed drop into 'the void' rather than end up in the Museum.

Later in 1897 the press became increasingly scornful of the idea of films at the august British institution. 'What a lively place the British Museum will be a hundred years hence', commented the *Photographic News* in July 1897 with more than a little bile, at a suggestion that both films and sound recordings made of Queen Victoria should be preserved in the Museum. And when in November another film concern, the American Biograph company, announced plans to deposit in the Museum 'photographs of all notable events of the current year', the *Photographic News* betrayed its impatience, asking:
... when is an event notable, and when isn't it? One of these notable event pictures is said to be the meeting of the Emperors at Buda Pesth. We should like to know of what earthly interest this is to the English people? We are not sanguine that the Museum authorities will jump at this and similar 'advertising' offers. Are we to suppose that for the benefit of those who might at some future time wish to see these animatographs in action a lantern and screen will be provided at the Museum? 

The very idea of a lantern and screen' being installed at the British Museum was clearly the last straw, and I have found no more discussion of films in the British Museum in the press of this period.

The impression one might be left with from these accounts is that somewhere lurking in the British Museum is a large cache of films, from Robert Paul and the American Biograph Company, all catalogued and preserved by the reluctant Colvin and his staff. Yet, there is a discrepancy. While most of the contemporary press reports speak of 'films', the single 'film' of the Derby is all that the British Museum's own internal records indicate. Furthermore, many years later when the British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings transferred this film on permanent loan to the Science Museum (ironically Paul's second choice as a home for his films), the Department's report noted that it 'is an isolated example'.

It seems more than likely that reports of large numbers of films arriving at the Museum are mere press agentry possibly originating within the film companies. The companies concerned would have gained both prestige and publicity by having their work accepted for preservation in the British Museum. Indeed the American Biograph company’s offer of films was described in the report quoted.

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Fig. 2. Sir Sidney Colvin, keeper of the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum: the world's first film archivist? From E.V. Lucas, The Colvins and Their Friends. (London: Methuen, 1928).

Fig. 3. Robert W. Paul (1869–1943) and the camera he may have used to photograph The Prince's Derby (1896).
above as ‘advertising’, and one journal thought that Paul’s offer was made for similar reasons:

‘Everything accepted by the museum is catalogued, and by this a certain amount of immortality is secured; ergo our worthy operator not only gains a little advertisement now, but he may perchance, from the home of the shades, look down upon an exhibition of his work in the far distant future’\textsuperscript{22}.

But apart from such prestige, there was little in it for the film companies, and this may be another factor in the British Museum failing to take off as Britain’s first film archive, especially as there was an alternative destination for films which offered copyright protection. This was Stationers’ Hall, the British national repository for copyright from the late 19th century up to 1912. From the 1890s the practice developed of sending film frames there, and it seems possible that the advantage of legal protection at Stationers’ Hall won out over mere posterity in the form of the British Museum\textsuperscript{23}.

If truth be told, this entire episode of contact between the early cinema and the British Museum had no very lasting consequences. However, it reveals a number of interesting concepts about the cinema and archives. Firstly, in terms of Paul’s surprisingly modern proposals about how films should be stored and accessed. Secondly, in the confusion raised for preservation policy by a new medium (analogous, perhaps, to current debates about the preservation of computer software). And thirdly, in the grave reluctance among some traditionalists to associate a body representing high culture with a vulgar entertainment medium: for such people the preservation of films was indeed ‘the collection of rubbish’.

Acknowledgement: My thanks to Richard Brown, who had independently researched this subject, and generously placed his findings at my disposal.

Notes

1. Gordon Hendricks, The Kinetoscope, NY 1966, p.47. The deposit took almost two months to clear, possibly due to ‘some doubt ... in the Copyright Office about the nature of the material being copyrighted’ (A descriptive analysis of the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection ..., Patrick G. Loughney, PhD, George Washington University, 1988, p. 54–58). For the next few years Edison sent samples of nitrate film for copyright protection, but from 1897 paper-print copies of the complete motion picture were sent. (Paul Spehr, ‘Some still fragments of a moving past’, Quarterly Jnl of the Library of Congress, 32/1 (January 1975), p. 39).


5. Truth, 10 December 1896, p. 1515. The Derby film, shot on 3 June, showed the Prince of Wales’ horse, Persimmon winning; the Henley regatta took place from the 7 to 9 July; and Princess Maud’s wedding was on the 22 July. (John Barnes, The Beginnings of the Cinema in England, David and Charles, 1976). While Paul’s spelling for his ‘animatographe’ included an ‘e’ on the end, others often omitted this.


7. In ‘Living Photographs of the Queen’, Cassells Family Magazine, 1897 p. 330. There is no evidence that such a container was ever made: certainly the one film he donated is not now held in such a container. (Letter from Science Museum, 23 May 1994).


10. The Era, 17 October 1896 p. 19. There may have been a similar confusion of classification in the Library of Congress over the first films received there (see note 1 above).


12. Colvin’s letter itself has apparently not survived, but is quoted in: ‘For the benefit of posterity: animatographs accepted by the British Museum’, Daily Chronicle, 6 February 1897, p. 8e. See also PN 12 February 1897 p. 98, and Westminster Gazette (WG) 5 February 1897 p. 7 cl. The latter article
notes that ‘Mr Paul proposes from time to time to supplement his original pictures by the addition of new films ...’


14. WG 20 February 1897 p. 2 c3. The possibility of Jubilee films ending up in the Museum was echoed in another report, which claimed that ‘a complete picture of the Jubilee procession is to be taken for the purpose of being preserved at the Museum’: Truth, 22 April 1897 p. 995. Many films of the Jubilee were of course made.


17. Information kindly supplied by Christopher Date of the British Museum, 14 April 1994. See also British Museum Society Bulletin, no. 30, March 1979.


19. PN 2 July 1897 p. 426. Though the same journal on 17 December p. 822 seemed to welcome the project.

20. PN 5 November 1897 p. 726; also see The Music Hall 5 November 1897 p. 10, and The Sketch 10 November 1897, p. 97, which describes another Austro-Hungarian film to be preserved, showing women building a house.

21. The report added that ‘it has not, so far as Mr. Popham is aware, been ever consulted’ (report from A.E. Popham, the then Keeper, 1st December 1947). The film was transferred to the Science Museum 31 December 1947, inventory number 324. Interestingly, Paul had offered three ‘original experimental models of the Animatographe’, to the South Kensington Museum, in a letter dated 15th May 1897, which he would present for their inspection ‘any morning before 11’. The Museum representatives went to Paul’s office to look at the machines on the 29th, and appear to have agreed to accept them. I haven’t been able to find if and when they were delivered, but if this really went ahead, they might well have been the first pieces of film equipment to be accepted by a museum. The officials also wondered if Paul could ‘supply any early ribbon of films’, but none are recorded in the Museum’s records. (Based on documents in the Science Museum archives, sent me by Richard Brown, and Science Museum archives Z81/2). Paul also deposited some samples of his electrical equipment in the Science Museum in 1892 and 1905 (Z46/2, Vol. 2, 1889–1913).


23. The contents of Stationers’ Hall are now held at the Public Record Office, where historians Richard Brown, and Michael and Nicholas Hiley discovered the film materials held there. Brown, now joined by the NFTVA Luke McKernan has commenced the cataloguing and preservation of these images. Unlike the Paper Print collection in Washington, the British images consist of short sections of positive film rather than complete paper prints, and material from a far lower proportion of films is represented. Supplementary information includes for many of the film entries includes the date of filming, and the cameraman.