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THE DEATH OF CINEMA

History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age

PAOLO CHERCHI USAI
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PREFACE

In a symposium held in the late summer of 1980 at the Venice Film Festival I spoke about the tragedy of colour degradation in the movies and made a call for action to prevent the further destruction of such a crucial component of our motion picture heritage. Had I known how much worse the situation was going to turn out in the years to come, I would have probably expressed myself in more dramatic terms. But how could I imagine that the colours of *Taxi Driver*, made only five years earlier, were already fading and needed urgent restoration? How could we know that contemporary cinema was as much in danger as the films made in the first half of the 20th century? At the time, the term ‘vinegar syndrome’ (now commonly used to designate the degradation of acetate motion picture film) had not even been invented by film archivists. All we knew was that prints were starting to shrink, become curled, and would be unprojectable by the time their penetrating, unpleasant acidic smell had reached almost unbearable levels. Convinced as I was that the main weapon at our disposal was the duplication of nitrate film onto a more stable medium, I encouraged archives to do so at a faster rate by supporting their efforts and endorsing their fundraising endeavours.

Much progress has been made since then. More film is being preserved than ever. More governments and granting agencies are involved in this challenge. Filmmakers such as Robert Altman and Clint Eastwood have joined The Film Foundation, which I established in 1990 with nine other eminent artists like Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, and Stanley Kubrick, to raise funds and awareness of the urgent need to preserve our motion picture history. Film preservation has become a relevant item in the cultural agenda of our times. There are now schools teaching how to preserve films, such as the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation, held at George Eastman House, where Paolo Cherchi Usai operates. There
are more efficient techniques to prolong the longevity of the film after restoration, from molecular sieves to slow down the vinegar syndrome process, to the creation of climatised vaults where films are being kept at better and more stable levels of temperature and humidity. Archives and laboratories know how to restore films better than they ever did before. Digital technology is certainly not a substitute for motion picture stock when it comes to the preservation of the original cinematic experience and the conservation of the film artifact, but it surely can help in facilitating the work of those who attempt at bringing back the moving image to its original glory.

Like all good things, however, the worthwhile cause of film preservation can be (and has been) abused in the name of commercial interests. The very term ‘preservation’ and ‘restoration’ are being indiscriminately appropriated by marketing experts who know nothing about preservation itself but are aware of the economic potential of its public appeal. Many of the films made available today through electronic media are misleadingly hailed as ‘restored’, while nothing really has been done to enhance their chances to be brought to posterity. No less damaging than the ‘vinegar syndrome’, the mystique of the restored masterpiece is condemning to obscurity thousands of lesser-known films whose rank in the collective memory has not yet been recognised by textbooks. (When I located a 35mm print of a favourite film of my childhood, *Fair Wind to Java*, it became painfully clear that no decent printing element existed for this Republic Pictures’ ‘B’ picture, shot in TruColor. It is currently being restored at UCLA with support from The Film Foundation.)

Finally, the critical role played by conservation in the mission to preserve the film heritage is still largely unrecognised by the public opinion. Somehow, audiences are being led to believe that digital will take care of it all with no need for special storage conditions. Indeed, spending money on the restoration of *Lawrence of Arabia* makes the donor as happy as the spectator watching the preserved film. While spending one hundred times as much for the construction of a refrigerated vault is of vital importance to keep the negative and print in good shape, there’s no glamour about it. For years I have been working with Paolo at the conservation of my own films at the George Eastman House, and know how frustrating his task can be when it comes to bringing the preservation to public attention. There will be no vaults for them back to us.

This book is an elegy to every day, all over the world, the tragic neglect of the film and the blatant indifference of people who once paid more attention to the care of a culture than to the film that has become something of the art of seeing as something
...vity of the film after res-
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...essment of my own films
...frustrating his task can be

when it comes to bringing this unrewarding and yet essential feature of film
...vation to public attention. But this is nothing compared to the massive
...tragedy of all the moving images that are already lost to us forever.
...There will be no vaults for them, and no fundraising effort will ever bring
...them back to us.

This book is an elegy to the thousands copies of films being destroyed
every day, all over the world, due to the lack of a global conservation strat­
...and the blatant indifference of some governments and the very same
...people who once paid money to make those films available to all. Paolo has
drawn with clinical precision (and a welcome touch of irony) the picture of
...a worldwide crisis that commands our unconditional concern. His portrait
...of a culture ignoring the loss of its own image is a devastating moral tale:
there is something very wrong with the way we are taught to dismiss the
art of seeing as something ephemeral and negligible.

Martin Scorsese
Rome, September 2000
INTRODUCTION

I had never seen a book torn to shreds in public until two years ago, when Francesco Casetti, a distinguished film theorist who happens to be a dear friend, and had volunteered to present an earlier version of this volume at the Cineteca Italiana in Milan on October 11, 2019, stunned the audience (and the publisher) by ripping off its pages, adding that 'there's no better way of reading this work'. He perfectly understood what this book is about. All the same, I can't think of a more appropriate way to summarise how some of the thoughts contained in it have been received over the years in their various incarnations — first as a *jeu d'esprit* for a journal of film theory, then as a more serious piece of business for the moving image preservation field, and finally as an attempt to explain why the argument at their core uses the term 'digital' as little more than a pretext for bringing the pleasures of controversy to a broader set of issues.

Back in 1977, at the time of my first experience in a film archive, I realised how little had been done to save the motion picture heritage, and was eager to enter the fray of repairing that neglect. Ten years later, I was at the peak of enthusiasm at the prospect of a collective effort to restore the cinema of the past to its original glory through the endeavours of film preservation. Another decade has passed, and the much touted benefits of the Digital Revolution have quickly shifted towards a subtle yet pervasive ideology. There's something inherently reactionary in how worldwide consensus has been gathered around this new myth of scientific progress. What's worse, denouncing its excesses will make you feel like the latest anti-technologist on the block. The subtitle of this book derives from Stewart Brand's *The Clock of the Long Now* (2019), the most effective attempt at questioning this self-perpetuating wave of cultural fundamentalism; however, much of the argument addressed in the pages that follow has different roots, and comes from a variety of directions, not necessarily linked to the digital persuasion. Why are we producing so many images that move and speak? Why do we try to preserve them? What do we think we are doing by presenting them as pristine reproductions of our visual heritage? Why is our culture so keen in accepting the questionable benefits of digital technology as the vehicle for a new sense of history?
An indirect proof of how unsettling these questions can be is given by the multiple titles this book has had in its previous printings. It began as *A Model Image*, and it seemed obscure to most readers, but digital was not quite yet the talk of the town; it turned into *Decay Cinema* and then *The Last Spectator*, thus raising the suspicion that the whole point of the book was some sort of Remembrance of Cinematic Things Past; it finally became *The Death of Cinema*, a concept we had been hearing of for a long time but dreaded to mention. The acid-free paper should make it slightly more difficult to tear the book apart in the future, but as far as I'm concerned the option still exists for those who have read it all the way through.

So why is it that a text written over fifteen years ago has not only refused to die, but has actually grown upon itself like a plant, into a wealth of amendments, rewrites and rethinkings? The fact is that I was unable to abandon it, and fortunately there were those who felt I should persist. Michele Lagny made it all happen in 01986, and is too modest to claim credit for it; Michele Canosa brought it to its first Italian translation in 01989, not without some personal risk. Roland Cosandey understood the project well enough to bring to my attention an 01897 notice from *La Nature*, knowing I could not resist the temptation of placing it at the head of this work, and I thank him for that. Simonetta Bortolozzi had no cultural agenda at stake, a fortunate coincidence that made her remarks and suggestions the most useful I've had in relation to the essay in its present form. The diagrams in Sections IX and XXIX are adapted from drawings by Stewart Brand and Brian Eno for the 01998 website of the Long Now Foundation (www.longnow.org).

The latest stages of the project have been blessed by two remarkable guardian angels. Renata Gorgani, director of the publishing company Il Castoro, of Milan, has believed in this project since she first read the manuscript, and it is thanks to her that it has now emerged exactly as it was intended. For this English (and revised) edition, Martin Sopocy has generously given his time, patience and editorial skills in helping me express what I wanted to say more effectively than I could ever have hoped. They have both understood that if I had to throw away everything I have written so far, and save only one thing from the bonfire, it would be this book. Now it belongs to them.

Rochester, New York, September 02000
A READER’S REPORT TO THE PUBLISHER

Madam,

I return herewith the manuscript of the work in progress you were good enough to pass along to me. I was already familiar with most of the ideas described in this treatise and if I have disagreements it is not because I find them unacceptable in themselves but because they don’t go far enough in addressing what I consider the most important aspect of the matter he attempts to treat, namely, the alarming growth of prejudice against all moving images that exist, or have existed, but which have not been seen.

I won’t shed tears over the death of cinema. This might be its first real chance to be taken seriously. It is estimated that about one and a half billion viewing hours of moving images were produced in the year 01999, twice the number made just a decade before. If that rate of growth continues, three billion viewing hours of moving images will be made in 02006, and six billion in 02011. By the year 02025 there will be some one hundred billion hours of these images to be seen. In 01895, the ratio was just above forty minutes, and most of it is now preserved. The meaning is clear. One and a half billion hours is already well beyond the capacity of any single human: it translates into more than 171,000 viewing years of moving pictures in a calendar year. Some may say that a good deal of that figure is produced by video cameras monitoring bank counters and parking lots, but I do not. With or without security monitors, the overall number of moving images we are preserving today is infinitesimal compared with mainstream commercial production. In India alone several hundred films are made a year, and only a tiny portion of them end in the archives. Television in developing countries is produced on videotapes that are erased every few months. If so many of those images come and go without our even hearing about
them, then how in the world can we form an idea of what cultural heritage is? The manuscript you are considering shows just the tip of the iceberg of moving image decay, and we miss the true proportions of it by not directing our attention to what lies below the water line. We quake with fear at a collision that has already taken place, and congratulate ourselves that we still have a mission to accomplish. Save our movie heritage! Rescue our history! When in fact we have already scrapped the notion of history, and are doing just fine without it. What I dislike is the pretense that we still have one. The most fictional form of this fantasy is called moving image preservation, a thing promoted by archivists to enhance their own importance. Well, they are important, but not for the reasons they imagine. Let me illustrate with an example from my own experience.

Some fifteen years ago, at the end of a meeting with the director of one of the major European film archives, the topic came up of the so-called vinegar syndrome, the irreversible chemical process of decomposition affecting prints struck on cellulose diacetate and triacetate. The issue, I was told, transcended the fact that thousands of the films we thought we had already preserved for posterity were heading for the same kind of decay we had witnessed before they were transferred from nitrate stock. What we thought of as a recent discovery was something chemists had long been familiar with. It was suggested, however, that we not advertise the fact. 'Imagine the impact it would have on our preservation projects. What reaction could you expect from donors and from sources of public funding if they were to learn that the money already invested in preserving our collections will keep them safe for just a short while longer?' In a catchphrase dear to the archivists of the 1970s and reproduced on many of their desks in the form of pop-art badges, Nitrate Won't Wait. Well, Acetate Won't Either.

Much has happened since then, but the vinegar syndrome is more than ever with us to know at our collections, and no remedy will defeat it altogether. The best we can do is to decelerate the process by keeping the films in vaults where temperature and humidity are strictly controlled. Polyester film – which is apparently not subject to the same kind of decay – may or may not be a viable alternative (emulsion likewise carries its own doom, regardless of the base) – but it’s worth a try. As it is, we have very little choice in the matter since manufacturers are gradually phasing out the production of acetate and nitrate. They have certainly not asked a seductive promise of a real one that can be reproduced ad infinitum. It is blatant to claim that. Meanwhile we go on restoring nitrate? We spend vast amounts in methods of our predecessors.

It may interest your author in demonstrating our defeat of our arrogance. As an antidote to the cause of film preservation malapropisms consists. I hope you are not enough to believe that cinema is Mozart? Did we really fooled to believe saved for future generations? Mozart’s Jupiter Symphony, it is not possible, and it never was.

The fact ought to be faced that the civilization is not film, whether one can tell) polyester. Ceran is safe too. Stone can be affected but gelatine emulsion is a thing of bones crushed and melted into crystals of silver salts. It won’t tend it isn’t true? Avoid discussing the guilty knowledge of it. We just stand by and reinvest our necropolis of precious documents, their expensive agony?

What person in their right mind personally, I’d much rather turn nas perfume making, sex and it gives me the creeps. Brooding
of what cultural heritage is the tip of the iceberg of portions of it by not directly protecting it. We quake with fear at a realization that we still take pride in demonstrating our defeat in such wealth of detail and with such outrageous arrogance. As an antidote to the disease of the ephemeral, he buries the cause of film preservation in the graveyard of which his collection of aphorisms consists. I hope he is satisfied. Has anyone ever been naïve enough to believe that cinema could be preserved like the cave paintings of Lascaux? Did we really fool ourselves into thinking that Citizen Kane could be saved for future generations just as we claim to save the Sistine Chapel, Mozart’s Jupiter Symphony, the Taj Mahal and Nefertari’s jewels? Well, it’s not possible, and it never was.

The fact ought to be faced that the most stable medium known to human civilization is not film, whether nitrate cellulose, acetate, or (as far as anyone can tell) polyester. Ceramics can last for millennia. Glass is reasonably safe too. Stone can be affected by climate and pollution. Canvas and wood have problems of their own. Something can be done for paper and frescoes, but gelatine emulsion is a thin layer of organic matter. Gelatine. Animal bones crushed and melted into a semitransparent layer intermixed with crystals of silver salts. It won’t last: it can’t. Then, what are we to do? Pretend it isn’t true? Avoid discussing it? Invoke the digital goddess to spare us the guilty knowledge of impending and irredeemable doom? Or shall we just stand by and reinvent ourselves as caretakers of a monumental necropolis of precious documents, for whom restoration means prolonging their expensive agony?

What person in their right mind would want to perform such a role. Personally, I’d much rather turn my attention to more rewarding activities such as perfume making, sex and landscape gardening. Nostalgia in any form gives me the creeps. Brooding over the past bores me to death, and I pray
for the patience to deal with people whose concern for cinema extends no further than knowing who turned the crank, how many films were made, the number of missing frames, who has the most accurate lists, and who is cleverest at organising them. Wake up and look around you! These are just moving shadows! A mere century of history! A hundred years worth of patents, matinees and forgotten celebrities! Other people’s leisure time turned into the subject of academic pursuits! In terms of geology, what is a century? Less than nothing. In terms of aesthetics, what is a century? A few pages of a book’s chapter, not even that, considering film hasn’t gained a place in art history textbooks. Why trouble ourselves? When told that New Zealand was at last going to have its own national film archive, experimental filmmaker Len Lye stared at its newly appointed director and asked, ‘Will it foster creativity?’

As far as I can see, there is little real justification for what we do. And I have no patience for a discipline that presumes to instruct me in what art is (the politique des auteurs, a lesson in film style, the hundred best movies ever made) or what has value as a document (everything that isn’t art: industrial, educational, scientific, promotional, amateur, propaganda films; pornography, B-movies). Documents of what? Of the air, heavy with indifference, that pervades the archives where these images are kept? Of the hypocrisy of governments who tell us a film isn’t worth saving unless it’s a masterpiece, and then won’t give us enough money to save even those? We have made a shelter for millions of reels – anything, whatever we could find – and are now forced to go the other way around and abide by the same laws we have so proudly defied. The tyranny of selection, of choice, of cultural discrimination. Consider it this way. There’s a physician, there are ten thousand patients, and there’s enough medicine to cure perhaps a hundred. The physician is you. Consult your feelings. Which patients will you choose to treat? And what will you say to the ninety-nine hundred who are denied treatment while they watch the lucky minority exit the hospital? Restoring one, ten, or a hundred films is a symbolic gesture of little consequence, no matter how important the films, unless it is matched by an awareness of the untreated supplicants.

As we discover when we inspect our vaults, nitrate images don’t dissolve as quickly as we first believed. Quite the contrary. Some of them will last more than a while, outliving even ourselves. Nitrate indestructible by the same amount of money could perhaps preserve twelvemonths’ adequate conditions of temporary preservation can be doubled just by an interesting bit of news for which has been destroyed after it’s been occasionally, for more than the 01970s, and the massacre is a moving image archive, then print to the lab and getting it moral to be drawn from this ing picture is gradually sufficient in this case, the photographic feasible than ever. The season Videotapes will probably be easier to market in developing DVD may or may not set the children are likely to see it as motion picture. Consider the running at 78 rpm lasted about enjoyed a heyday of thirty years compact disc is already all. Something new every year, whatever the next new technology be the same. Whatever that need to keep the old nitrate on, they will take back that B-line to the garbage bin (or or less the same thing until regramme) to sort through the to another newborn technology hopes we didn’t follow their.

All of which means that an
for cinema extends no further than a hundred years worth of people’s leisure time, in terms of geology, what is a century? A century ending film hasn’t gained itself? When told that a national film archive, experienced director and asked,


more than a while, outliving their acetate relatives and perhaps surviving even ourselves. Nitrate indeed often will wait. Which means that with the same amount of money needed to duplicate a hundred nitrate prints we could perhaps preserve twenty times that many in a climatised vault with adequate conditions of temperature and humidity. The estimated life of a print can be doubled just by bringing down the thermostat a few degrees – an interesting bit of news for those who used to insist that nitrate should be destroyed after it’s been copied! (Getting rid of the original prints after preservation – officially, for security reasons – was not uncommon till the 1970s, and the massacre is still going on in some countries.) The work of a moving image archive, therefore, is something more than rushing a nitrate print to the lab and getting its reproduction to look as new as possible. The moral to be drawn from this is that at the dawn of an era where the moving picture is gradually suffering the loss of the object that carries it – in this case, the photographic film – the object itself is becoming more valuable than ever. The season of laserdiscs was brief, it’s already history. Videotapes will probably last a bit longer by virtue of being cheap and easier to market in developing countries, but their days too are numbered. DVD may or may not set the standard for years to come, but our grandchildren are likely to see it as yet another episode in the archaeology of the motion picture. Consider the history of recorded sound. Phonograph discs running at 78 rpm lasted about half a century. Vinyl long-playing records enjoyed a heyday of thirty years before heading for the flea markets. The compact disc is already ailing after less than two decades. What next? Something new every year, as in the fashion industry? Time will tell, but whatever the next new technological wonder proves to be, the results will be the same. Whatever that may happen to be, you will be told there’s no need to keep the old nitrate or acetate junk, because it is all digitised. Later on, they will take back that advice. Or pretend they never gave it; make a B-line to the garbage bin (or to the archive, which has been for them more or less the same thing until recently, but much cheaper than a recycling programme) to sort through the debris for what is salvageable and transferable to another newborn technology – in short, come knocking on our doors in hopes we didn’t follow their example or take their advice.

All of which means that an archive for moving images will end as a kind
of museum – in the sense we currently give that term of an asylum for cultural artifacts, notwithstanding the tendency to run them like high-class amusement parks. Museums themselves may finally be forced to give a coherent answer to a dilemma they have been living with for decades. Are they to be archives in the literal sense, or venues for permanent theme festivals? Are they to preserve or to show? The most logical course would be to separate those functions altogether: care for the artifacts in one place, and in another (close enough to the archive) develop strategies for intellectual access, but since when do developments follow a logical pattern? It is difficult enough to explain the need for the maintenance of collections and to attract funding for that purpose – especially when there is little more to show than a frosted storage room. Showing on a big screen what has been collected is no less important, but it requires the attention and the interest of the public, and the public is seldom enough willing to let the archives have their say.

What happens when there is a collision between the interests of the programmer of festivals and those of the collection manager (as the Artist formerly known as Curator is now called)? To dramatise the point, let us imagine that a consortium of archives of the moving image has undertaken a new reconstruction of what we shall call The Absolute Masterpiece® (Restoration™ No. 456 ©), directed sometime during the 1920s by an Undisputed Genius of Cinema. Let us also assume that the film has been available for decades. And incidentally, wasn’t there another highly touted restoration of the same film just a few years ago? Yes, but some newly discovered footage may bring us closer to the look the film had in the 1920s. In that case, good! Besides, because of recent improvements in laboratory techniques, we can now be sure that the images will be sharper than ever. In that case, very good! It also seems that an incomplete nitrate negative of a foreign language version has come to light. In that case, excellent! And besides, some tinted prints were unearthed a few years ago, and it may now be possible to inject some colour into the preservation copies. In that case, splendid! There’s even an annotated script, censorship documents, and a complete set of previously unpublished production stills. In that case, what are we waiting for? Let us by all means restore The Absolute Masterpiece® for the upteenth time. There are so many reasons why we should. A fellow institution outside the consortium served a complete first generation of it, whose footage could be back in all its pristine glory. Does it do the job better than it does that remain true? Will The Absolute Masterpiece® alone for a while that are staring us in the face.

A ghost haunts the corridor of this restoration, otherwise known as The Death of Cinema. But not long after it had been preserved, the preservation began to take effect. Ambitious terms such as ‘restored’ are at times quite difficult to define. But not long after it had been preserved, the preservation began to take effect. Ambitious terms such as ‘restored’ are at times quite difficult to define. But not long after it had been preserved, the preservation began to take effect. Ambitious terms such as ‘restored’ are at times quite difficult to define. But not long after it had been preserved, the preservation began to take effect. Ambitious terms such as ‘restored’ are at times quite difficult to define. But not long after it had been preserved, the preservation began to take effect. Ambitious terms such as ‘restored’ are at times quite difficult to define. But not long after it had been preserved, the preservation began to take effect. Ambitious terms such as ‘restored’ are at times quite difficult to define. But not long after it had been preserved, the preservation began to take effect. Ambitious terms such as ‘restored’ are at times quite difficult to define. But not long after it had been preserved, the preservation began to take effect. Ambitious terms such as ‘restored’ are at times quite difficult to define. But not long after it had been preserved, the preservation began to take effect.
institution outside the consortium, the Faraway Film Archive, has also preserved a complete first generation print of another foreign language version of it, whose footage could be helpful in bringing *The Absolute Masterpiece* back in all its pristine glory. For surely no restoration is pointless as long as it does the job better than it’s ever been done before. Yet to what degree does that remain true? Will the time ever come when we leave *The Absolute Masterpiece* alone for a while and concentrate on some of the catastrophes that are staring us in the face?

A ghost haunts the corridors of the film archives, the ghost of redundant restoration, otherwise known as new restoration. Its presence is hardly unexpected, yet it has now reached alarming proportions, affecting as it does all institutions whose *raison d’être* is the preservation of the moving image. The rationale behind the phenomenon of the archival remake is complex and often contradictory, but here are some of its recurring themes.

1) Audiences are eager to see these films. Collectors would like to own them in the form of viewing copies, whether photomechanic or digital. Before anything else, archivists would like to extend them their protection. But not long after it had established itself as an art and a technique, film preservation began to take on the features of a business operation. Ambitious terms such as ‘restored’, ‘reconstructed’, or ‘digitally remastered’ are at times quite misleadingly used by corporate entities, by festivals, and even a by boisterous minority of film archives in order to promote unpublicised agendas of their own, in which case it would be wise to take their testimony with a grain of salt. Given a negative or a print in good shape plus a sufficiency of funds, it’s all packed up and sent to the lab, where the trick is swiftly performed. In some cases all that has happened is a clean-up of the negative and the addition of some colour saturation to give it a brighter look. Which is not exactly a restoration. However, you are forbidden to say so because they not you are the specialists, the prints you saw were scratched and faded, and you obviously don’t remember how bad they looked, so hold your tongue and pay close attention to the words of wisdom that are emanating from their publicity departments.

Production companies – the very same which till 01960 were unfazed by the prospect of losing their older negatives through ruin because they supposed there was no more money to be made out of them – are largely responsible for
this, though they are now aware that with just a little effort certain of these old films may be turned into breadwinners again.

2) The public and private institutions who finance restoration projects are often motivated by a desire for prestige that renders them indifferent to the fate of thousands of interesting but totally unprestigious titles that will never attract the attention of mass audiences. (Sales of the average video release of a silent film in the United States rarely exceed 1500 copies.) The price to be paid for the dictatorship of public opinion is legitimate when it promotes film preservation as a cause worthy in itself rather than a mere luxury for a privileged élite. But in some countries there is a perverse disposition to ‘restore’ films which are already preserved elsewhere. There is something downright immoral about a duplication of effort upon a classic for no other reason than to assert a claim to prominence in the field, when a hundred films of unknown origin but of real interest are left to rot in the vaults.

3) After years of ransacking their holdings, the archives have few lost masterworks left to rediscover. A gem here and there perhaps, but they get rarer all the time. Gone is the golden age of the triumphant reemergence of the ‘lost’ film, an age that owed so much to the initiatives of institutions like the Nederlands Filmmuseum and the National Film Center of Tokyo, but by now the bottom of the barrel is all but naked to view. Film festivals are increasingly aggressive (‘what unknown treasure can we spring this time?’), because archives have been spoiling them for years. When the gold has been mined to a fare-thee-well, the Forty-niner packs up and goes home to count what was all along locked in the safe.

4) Restoring a badly damaged film takes a lot of time and money. Film restoration worth the name requires vast amounts of patience and dedication. However great the benefits may be to future generations, it may lack instant gratification for the intelligentsia of the present. Few benefactors will give film preservation their unconditional support. They want to know what is to be restored, and to be assured that, once restored, they will like it, or at least that it will appeal to large audiences. Non-fiction shorts of the early years? No thanks, but how about some Greta Garbo? Incidentally, one thing our successors are sure to inherit is the ability to show no more than a tiny fraction of what has been preserved. More than 95% of what is now in the archives will continue their lie. And the public is always potential electorate. What an email, given the cost of the film. For the sake of some (highly) project, donors may be the sheer conspicuousness of looking obscure titles, worthy though to which naive or opportunist work in haste, on the premise of really good print and a mediocre option for colour preservation of three masters, one for each three times as much as a stand in the vault. In an enterprise so films have been restored with wonder that the existing preserved colour print, only more dislike mentioning it for fear of...
archives will continue their (not so peaceful) slumbers on our shelves. Whether we like it or not, the greatest conservative in this game is the public. And the public is always right when government officials regard it as a potential electorate. What answer can there be to that subtle form of blackmail, given the cost of the endeavour: several thousand dollars per reel of film. For the sake of some highly visible (even though in the long run irrelevant) project, donors may be willing to throw money out the window for the sheer conspicuousness of the gesture, but they draw the line at preserving obscure titles, worthy though they may be. The commercial laboratories to which naïve or opportunistic professionals bring their copies sometimes work in haste, on the premise that few will know the difference between a really good print and a mediocre dupe. A single negative is a less than ideal option for colour preservation. A separation negative (consisting as it does of three masters, one for each primary colour) is far more stable, but it costs three times as much as a standard print and occupies three times the space in the vault. In an enterprise so costly in every way, no wonder so few colour films have been restored with the most adequate technology. Nor is it any wonder that the existing preservation copies are fading away like any standard colour print, only more slowly. Curators are well aware of this, but dislike mentioning it for fear of jeopardising their funding.

5) As often happens when a valid principle is applied too literally, the notion that each print is an original with its own historical identity can be an excuse for an unjustifiable expenditure of time, money and energy. If a certain American film survives in a single copy found in the Netherlands, and has Dutch intertitles, it is needless to say a good plan to restore it as is, lest we otherwise be unable to see it at all. But if that same film is already fully preserved in its American release version, and still another copy of it survives with titles in a different language but much shorter in length, I fail to see the rationale of restoring it once again. It is sometimes argued that such a restoration is justified because the film was originally seen by another audience in a different form. But after all, how far are we willing to carry that principle? Applying it in an indiscriminate way can be wasteful and ridiculous. In the late 1990s there was an uproar over the duplication by the Cinémathèque française of a heavily abridged nitrate print of Chicago, a film produced by Cecil B. DeMille and co-directed by Fred Urson and Paul Iribe.
in 1928. A beautiful and very complete print with original intertitles can be found at the UCLA Film and Television Archive in Los Angeles. In reply to protests at the redundancy of the project the archive explained that the short version of this American film was an artifact of French culture because of its original distribution in France in that form. And the reply is correct in the literal sense that the term ‘national film heritage’ should not be limited to the films actually produced within its distribution territory. In just that way, the Jean Desmet collection, a remarkable corpus of 920 titles made between 1906 and 1936 consisting mainly of non-Dutch productions, is unquestionably part of the Dutch film heritage because of the role played by these films in the history of film distribution in the Netherlands plus its status as a coherent, self-contained constellation of prints. Well and good. But consider the 50-minute American version of Cabiria held by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. MoMA does well to protect this drastic abridgement of Pastrone’s historical epic, yet imagine what the response would be if it were to announce a new restoration of it. Most people would prefer to see the version restored by the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin at 183 minutes and 16 frames per second, and who could quarrel with them. Yet is so happens that the MoMA print contains a crucial shot (of a naked child held by a pair of hands toward some raging flames) missing from the standard version of Turin until the mid-1990s. Indeed it was the discovery of that shot that persuaded the Turin archive that a new restoration of Cabiria was in order.

All very sensible and rational. In the meantime, while some festival advertises the premiere of a new version of The Absolute Masterpiece, thousands of nitrate reels agonise on their shelves. We are left to wonder whether this cycle of thinking can ever be broken. As regards that situation, the author of this collection of aphorisms is as shrewd in his diagnosis as he is vague about the corrective steps to be taken. I see only one course of action that can be effective: the creation of a registry of unpreserved films, compiled by a consortium of public and private institutions, small and large, taking upon itself the responsibility of seeing that the list is circulated and read by the largest number of people, and in the kindest way in the world, yet firmly, refusing to entertain a single restoration project, however well supported by newspaper headlines, which might indirectly condemn other less well known projects that govern the task of preserving standards as precisely dealing with the fine arts. I deny restoration projects to adhere to the latest fashions of managing administrative duties, funds would prevent the archives to exist as integrated but separated to the enrichment of the glory of some splashy event.

Digital culture has become an issue cannot be defined as integrated but separated to the enrichment of the glory of some splashy event. But surely an effort at may be would put both sides we have learned to fight against those frail but cumbersome adamantine with those who reject the name of tradition and out of respect for the intervention of electronic real issues transcend either of them and that the latest should or should not be defined as integrated but separated to the enrichment of the glory of some splashy event.

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condemn other less well known films to slow death in the vaults. A con-
sortium that would encourage the review of the policies and procedures
that govern the task of preservation in the archives, and that would re-
commend standards as precise as the ones observed in similar institutions
dealing with the fine arts. A consortium that would urge its members to
deny restoration projects to laboratories that fail to meet the exacting par-
eters required (and whose incompetence, by the way, can perpetuate the
spiraling phenomenon of the archival remake). A consortium that at long
last would help to end the deadly and wasteful confusion that exists between
administrative duties, fundraising, and curatorial responsibility. One that
would prevent the archives from falling into the hands of those trained in
the latest fashions of management science but illiterate in film, or vice versa.
And most important, a consortium that would not be dictated to about what
should or should not be done with the images that have survived, one, in
short, that would insist that film curators and development officers continue
to exist as integrated but separate professional entities whose operations are
gearèd to the enrichment of posterity and not exclusively to the ephemeral
glory of some splashy event, however apt to attract funding.

Digital culture has become the latest arena in which continues the old
debate on what curatorial expertise should render to Caesar and what to
God. But surely an effort at specifying what its proper uses and limitations
may be would put both sides of the argument into sharper focus. Much as
we have learned to fight against those who would have us jettison altogether
those frail but cumbersome artifacts called film prints, we should be no less
adamant with those who reject all kinds of technological advance in the
name of tradition and out of a misplaced sense of historical integrity. The
issue cannot be defined either in terms of a blind utopian faith in what the
future will bring or in those of a purism so narrow that it rejects outright
the intervention of electronics into areas where it has never existed. The
real issues transcend either of those romantic attitudes. Two considerations
ought to be kept in mind. The first is that perversion of the democratic ideal
into which the larger issues of the guardianship of a cultural heritage has
inserted a mistaken notion of the right to public access. Many of those who
are unaware of the operations of a moving image archive are under the
impression that a film available on video is actually preserved somewhere.
They are the first to transfer their parents’ home movies onto tape and then discard the originals. We’ve all heard them: ‘Hey, I can watch them on my computer. Why don’t you do likewise? What’s the big deal? Why spend a fortune on conservation? Didn’t you just say they’ll decompose just the same? They’re not yours anyway. They belong to the Hollywood majors, so let them do it.’ There is an element of truth in this: the archives can see the advantage of sparing their precious prints the wear and tear of projection by making them available in other forms, and it carries the additional attractions of egalitarianism (easy access for all) and cost-effectiveness (cheaper reference copies). But by yielding to it we lend ourselves to the situation of the tourists who spend a day in line waiting to see Cézanne, follow it by a twenty-minute stroll through the galleries, and cap it off by going to the gift shop to pick up a poster of their favorite painting. It is a ritual that pays lip service to the duty of educating the public, even while encouraging to its Been There, Done That. And who can blame them?

The second point to be stressed is that a viable answer is yet to be found to the obsolescence created by every new hardware system. The best solution we’ve been able to arrive at so far is to duplicate all moving images from one system to another before the new technology has thoroughly killed its predecessor. The very discussion of whether or not digital technology (for example) will allow us to transfer all the decaying film into digital form, preserve it as such for an indefinite period of time, and then convert it back to film again is self-delusory. For even if it were technically feasible — and, for the present at least, it is not economically so — there are technologies of the moving image that will not lend themselves to such a proceeding. How to preserve artworks made on cd-rom? What techniques should be used to restore video games? Will there eventually be a museum to preserve the moving and speaking images available through the world wide web? (To the best of my knowledge, the Library of Congress is still alone among public institutions in experimenting with that idea by saving all the world’s websites once a month. The drawback that makes this preservation project inaccessible to the user is that there is a good deal of pornography in it.) It is not surprising that a good 80% of the films produced during the silent period are lost. The percentage of loss of motion pictures made within the last ten years will exceed even that. The future holds escalating percentages of loss, for production is reservation will soon be a drop in the number of moving imaging how many there had been.

Amid all this confusion, la giggle to the latest cause to of motion picture stock, one hearing about since 1920. They try won’t risk its money on another hi-tech turnover. They are made to a consumer who the market research indicates produced for a while, if only The reasons for the survival enough to find. The users and can transfer it to whatever with technological change for such a simple object, so simple in over a hundred years and, to see its images. Computer projects, but you’ll always be able you need is a light source, a lens.

But if you really want to aphoristic author’s unfinished come (and sooner than you think because Hollywood will no nothing that anyone can do maintain a complex and costly demand for archival film stock options? Unable to preserve cinemadoubt after a few pathetic gestures for their own use) will be options. Projecting a film will rare occurrence, and finally any will be projected, either becau
movies onto tape and then I can watch them on my big deal? Why spend a day to the Hollywood majors, and then it carries the additional decompose just the to see Cézanne, galleries, and cap it off by building the public, even while who can blame them? The answer is yet to be found re system. The best solution is thoroughly killed or not digital technology using film into digital form, and then convert it back technically feasible – and, there are technologies of such a proceeding. How techniques should be used to museum to preserve the world wide web? (To the system, this preservation project of pornography in it.) It produced during the silent pictures made within the fields escalating percentages of loss, for production is rising at such a rate that the best efforts at preservation will soon be a drop in the bucket. We will be unable even to estimate the number of moving images lost because there will be no way of knowing how many there had been.

Amid all this confusion, lab technicians can only respond with a nervous giggle to the latest cause to be unearthed for the imminent decay and loss of motion picture stock, one of the many deaths of cinema we have been hearing about since 1920. They are all aware that the entertainment industry won’t risk its money on films it will be unable to exploit because of another hi-tech turnover. Their promises of new webs, lasers and satellites are made to a consumer who will shell out hard cash to acquire them once the market research indicates the time is ripe. Film stock will continue to be produced for a while, if only for master elements such as camera negatives. The reasons for the survival of this nineteenth-century invention are easy enough to find. The uses and potential of 35mm are well-nigh infinite. You can transfer it to whatever you please, and you needn’t concern yourself with technological change for the simple reason that photographic film is such a simple object, so simple that is hasn’t descended into obsolescence in over a hundred years and, better yet, you don’t need much equipment to see its images. Computer programmes become hieroglyphs within a short time, but you’ll always be able to build a projector and make a screen. All you need is a light source, a lens and a shutter plus a large white surface. But if you really want to know what the final chapter will be of your aphoristic author’s unfinished manuscript, let me tell you. The day will come (and sooner than you think) when 35mm film will no longer be made because Hollywood will no longer need it, and there will be absolutely nothing that anyone can do about it. What company would willingly maintain a complex and costly facility for a handful of institutions whose demand for archival film stock would not even meet the cost of its operations? Unable to preserve cinema by means of cinema, the archives (no doubt after a few pathetic gestures such as proposing to manufacture film for their own use) will be forced to face up to reality and go for other options. Projecting a film will become first a special circumstance, then a rare occurrence, and finally an exceptional event. Eventually nothing at all will be projected, either because all surviving copies will be worn to a fraz-
zle or decomposed, or because somebody decides to stop showing them in order to save for future duplication onto another format the few prints that remain. There will be a final screening attended by a final audience, perhaps indeed a lonely spectator. With that, cinema will be talked about and written about as some remote hallucination, a dream that lasted a century or two. Future generations will be hard put to understand why so many people spent their lives in an effort to resuscitate that dream.

If all this comes to pass, our successors will have to face once again, though under different conditions, the same dilemmas that face us. Shall they try to preserve all moving images or only some of them? The answer may lie in another question. Must a museum cover the entire history of art, from prehistoric scratches on bones to Damien Hirst, to justify its existence? Museums exist of the arts of ancient Greece, of pre-Columbian pottery, of French Impressionists, of Medieval sculpture. Which most of us accept. Then why not accept the idea of one archive devoted exclusively to cinema, another to video, and on and on? Still, the notion of a Louvre of the moving image holds a powerful attraction for us, possibly because we pretend that moving images are too young for a specialised history. Which is a great pity. Before long, circumstances may force us to modify our ambitions and see how well we can operate the equivalent of a Musée du Jeu de Paume. A century of cinema is more than enough to cope with. There would be plenty of work for everyone for years to come.

In the short run (in accordance with the tendency to see film and video as separate forms of expression despite their mutual influences) the distinctions among the various components of a museum might even resolve themselves within the same archival institution. It might please us to think of it as a producer, a research centre, a permanent encyclopedia, a publisher, a school for professional training despite the risk implicit in a proliferation of goals, in doing a bit of everything while nothing gets done. But it should be acknowledged that the discipline of moving image preservation has resolved itself into at least two practical philosophies: the institution that features a single specialty, be it conservation (Library of Congress), programming (Cinémathèque française), archival training (George Eastman House) or devotion to a single theme (Imperial War Museum), and the one that aims at a synthesis of a variety of functions (British Film Institute). But the concept of cinema as a special house of permanent education has a special attraction. The cult of Evil as Orson Welles intended; the ideology of the Cabiria and Rocco and His Brothers classic cinema to new audio Digital version. The filmgoer of the mystique surrounding the screen, or because it has become fashionable to operate through an entire history of conception, failing as it does motion pictures that only a few distributors will both want and needs. But too many films would lose their uncertain legal status.

Copyright control was born in the legal writing rights of individual producers, degenerated into an obscene power. The producers of a country's intellectual writers, performers, cinema protected, a prerogative that was extended to families and heirs. Once upon a time when the commercial release of a film without the consent of all who rescued it was imprisonment of a film without enjoyment that prevented its disappearance. A good question for the ow where were you when Henrik
to stop showing them in format the few prints that by a final audience, perhaps will be talked about and a dream that lasted a century
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(British Film Institute). But they have a common tendency towards a concept of cinema as a special event. Instead of steadily declining as repertory houses of permanent education, they might yet become institutions of the special attraction. The cult of the director’s cut has already given us Touch of Evil as Orson Welles intended it, and The Wild Bunch with the alternate ending; the ideology of the longer version has already given us Nights of Cabiria and Rocco and His Brothers before the cuts; interest in bringing classic cinema to new audiences has already given us Vertigo in its Dolby Digital version. The filmgoing experience has already assumed something of the mystique surrounding an opera event. A younger generation will come to the theatre because of its curiosity about the strengths of the big screen, or because it has discovered that the promise of a Global Cinematheque in electronic form is a delusion, for what would the demand be for the complete works of Allan Dwan on their home computer? The notion that a digital or satellite library would make it possible to browse through an entire history of cinema on our monitors is an astonishing misconception, failing as it does to recognise the realities of a mass of obscure motion pictures that only a handful of people will ever want to see and even fewer distributors will bother making accessible for cash. And even if they did, too many films would be kept out of public consumption because of their uncertain legal status.

Copyright control was born from the intention of protecting and promoting rights of individual creativity. That noble concern has now degenerated into an obscene legal construct for the furtherance of economic power. The producers of a film are usually its owners, although in some countries the moral claims of its other contributors — such as directors, writers, performers, cinematographers, composers — are also asserted and protected, a prerogative that sometimes becomes hereditary, descending to families and heirs. Once upon a time films were abandoned or destroyed after their commercial release. Now they are cultural treasures. But who was it after all who rescued them from oblivion and loss? An archive may own a copy of a film without enjoying the right to exhibit it. As if the intervention that prevented its disappearance were a theft to be forgiven!

A good question for the owners and proprietors of moral rights would be: where were you when Henri Langlois and Jacques Ledoux and James Card
were paying out of their own slim resources to avoid seeing tons of nitrate film loaded into dumpsters? Would not mere justice have required that they be reimbursed? Have you no responsibility for the costs incurred in fifty years of preservation and storage? Is that not a moral right of no less weight than your own? It was their choice to preserve films without seeking permission. Nobody forced them to do it, and there is some legitimacy in their right to go on doing it without being treated like burglars. No one will deny the legitimacy of copyright for the encouragement of cultural industry in the 19th century, but today its uneven application is an obstruction to that very purpose, and the unavailing struggle against the illegal duplication of moving images through the electronic media shows how urgent is the need for some other framework, some legal control of creativity that doesn’t inhibit creativity itself. The time must come when the rights to moving images made for commercial purposes must give way to the claims of history. It is not a new idea that a pluralist society must be able to promote culture as a driving force of its economy, and not the other way around.

And so it happens that moving image archives are keenest to preserve the films that have fallen into the public domain. They existed long before the paranoia of copyright prevailed over common sense. Other films of recent make go under the name of ‘orphans’ in the archives, either because their production companies no longer exist or because of an oversight of copyright renewal. Either the relatives of directors and performers are dead, or it never occurred to them to assert their claims. Should these films be allowed to crumble to dust because they are of no monetary value? How are the archives to understand their own reason for existing? Are they responsible for what should have been done by others, or wait till the last possible minute to follow the dictates of conscience? If that’s all copyright is good for, then let it be damned. What use and justice does it have? Future generations may have to wait before seeing the films, but their legal owners should be forced to wait with them. Let them bring us to court. We are eager for an opportunity to publicise this monstrous inequity. Let them prohibit public access. Patience is the archivist’s first virtue, and the copyright predators will learn what patience is when they are confronted with the task of exploiting moving images as lots of real estate. We can wait, but meanwhile shall we or shall we not preserve them?

Which is exactly what our predecessors were ruling we remember that all of the digital age and the vinegary serve a thing that is no less right to see them. Seeing is an end to all this angst over the for Bruce Chatwin’s writing about museums in his fiction every fifty years in order to reinterest and appeal. Life is short. It’s still here. It may become there are worse things. Physical predalone. Losing interest in the more years, let us first press enrichments. There is a chance paradox that a film screening is a popular art and entertainment boosted price of admission an neckties to them, except to the
Which is exactly what our predecessors did at a time when nobody would listen to them. It may even be good for us to do it again for a while, provided we remember that all our talk about budgets and legal rights, about the digital age and the vinegar syndrome is meaningless if it does not preserve a thing that is no less precious than moving images themselves, the right to see them. Seeing is an art unto itself. And absolutely nothing compels us to turn what is for us a passion into a business. We may succumb to that temptation now and then, when our goals require it. But let us put an end to all this angst over the end of cinema. I have no particular fondness for Bruce Chatwin’s writings, but I do find there are some accurate hits about museums in his fictional work, and his idea of dismantling them every fifty years in order to restore life to the objects they contain has some interest and appeal. Life is short, and cinema won’t last forever. But for now it’s still here. It may become something else, but so what if it does? There are worse things. Physical pain. Not enough food, or none at all. Being alone. Losing interest in the art of seeing. If we want cinema to exist a few more years, let us first preserve the good things that make it one of life’s enrichments. There is a chance of succeeding as long as we can accept the paradox that a film screening in a museum, contrary to what it has been as a popular art and entertainment for over a century, is a gala soirée with a boosted price of admission and a certain amount of formality. I don’t wear neckties to them, except to the ones you attend.
REPLY

Sir,

Yes, I will certainly publish the manuscript you have returned to me, despite what you call its arrogance and my own doubts about the benefits it may render (for nobody in the world ever truly sees anything he hasn’t personally paid for) and despite those readers who will be encouraged to think that they have at last encountered the Model Image or at any rate have come close to seeing it themselves. But I find it worth publishing it for the sake of its testimony to the fragility of human vision.

If it has any instructive lesson, there is one for viewers themselves, for it shows that all lost moving images have at least existed for some viewer in the past. The unseen is an integral part of our lives, even if not directly our own. I well remember the experience of hearing Kevin Brownlow describe the lovely tinted and toned nitrate print of The Blue Bird (Maurice Tourneur, 1918) he had seen years earlier. Listening to him I could understand something of its loss: it might have existed as recently as twenty years ago, and I might have seen it. Still, I can feel no despair over it. No exhaustive filmography of lost cinema will ever be possible, and I'm quite satisfied to leave it at that. The fact that the unseen is beyond our control is an excellent antidote to our claim to authority over the visible world, and administers a good shaking up to our deluded obsession with permanence. Sooner or later you and I will both disappear, along with our visions and memories of what we have seen and the way we have seen it. Don’t deceive yourself.
The final sequence of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) stirred countless speculations on its 'message'. Early reviews complained about the non-narrative structure of the film, lamenting the fact that audiences could not understand the director's intentions. In rejecting this approach, Kubrick told an interviewer that 'once you're dealing on a non-verbal level, ambiguity is unavoidable. But it's the ambiguity of all art, a fine piece of music or a painting – you don't need written instructions by the composer or painter accompanying such works to "explain" them. "Explaining" them contributes nothing but a superficial "cultural" value which has no value except for critics and teachers who have to earn a living. In this sense, the film becomes anything the viewer sees in it.' (Joseph Gelmis, *The Film Director as Superstar* [New York: Doubleday, 1970], pp. 303–304.)
The concept of a film history based on a regressio ad infinitum—that is, from an image that has completely vanished to its theoretical inception as a Model Image—is germane to an understanding of film history itself as a cultural artifact. However, a reverse narrative leading from a factual nonentity (an image that has been lost forever) to its potential counterpart (an image existing before being seen for the first time) makes it difficult to use the term ‘history’ at all. The inquiry into the past of the moving image should then be redefined not so much as an attempt to explain the causes of its transformation but as an endless journey into the unachieved potential of the image itself and the intentions of its maker.