The Future of Memory: Disrupting the Archives to Save It

Rick Prelinger FIAF 2015, Sydney

Sunday, April 19, 15

I want to begin by thanking those who have made my visit possible – Michael Loebenstein and his staff at the NFSA, including especially Krista Pocknall, and all my old and new friends here for their kindness and hospitality.

It's a great privilege to speak at the start of this Symposium. I last spoke at FIAF in Los Angeles in 1995, and I remember projecting tiny QuickTime images off of CD-ROMs onto a giant screen. I think this may have been the first time that 320 x 240 pixel images were presented at one of your Congresses. Despite this rather depraved rejection of resolution and quality, you were most welcoming, and my provocations today will be purely verbal.

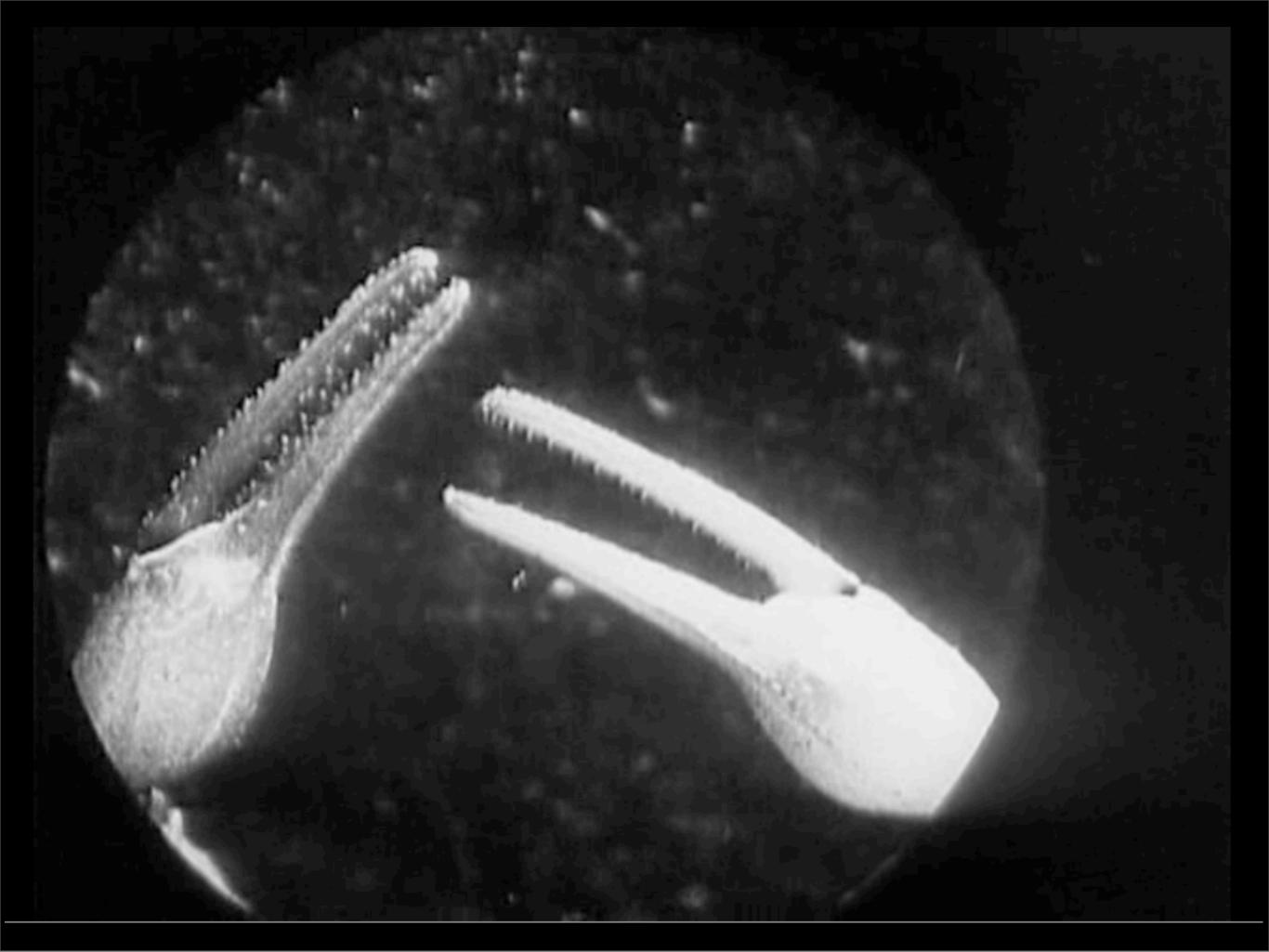
I want to specify the position from which I'm speaking. Do I identify as an archivist? I don't know. I'm not an

institutional archivist. I primarily collect home movies and try to propagate archival materials to the world. I touch film as often as I can, but haven't been socialized or trained as an archivist. I spend more of my time thinking about the history and future of archives. I tend to think the term "meta-archivist" is most descriptive.

Starting in late 2000 I was fortunate to join with Internet Archive to build a freely downloadable online collection. The opportunity to provide a fairly high degree of access to the materials I'd collected changed my life. The Internet Archive project turned me into a virtual collaborator with many hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world, and helped enable the production of thousands upon thousands of derivative works. Being able to give away pictures, sounds and data is a highly privileged position, and it's caused me to think somewhat differently about archives and access to the cultural heritage than many others. I don't take archival workflow for granted. And I'm not sure I take archives (as we know them) for granted. I'm therefore unsure whether I have the right to use the term "we" when I speak of archivists, but I will anyway.



Like most of us, I have a fascination with the material with which I work. That fascination is an expression of a particular flavor of cinephilia, because the power of the moving image is matched only by its inconvenience. The contradiction between our desire to preserve images and sounds forever and their increasing impermanence never gets easier to live with. And the only way to understand this desire is to think of it as manifested in acts of faith. It is hard to touch these ideas. But what I'm going to try and do in today's talk is address some of the conditions that make us anxious, ask us to put aside some of our received ideas about the practice and theory of collecting images and sounds, and try to pose a few harder questions.



I don't have much new to say about the externalities that affect archives. We are faced with the possible end of film. In this age when retrotech carries quite a cachet, I am hardpressed to believe that it is permanent, but it is troublesome. And we are faced with a condition that is systemic but I really hope can end: the marginalization of the theatrical cinema experience. And we are faced with extremely aggressive and disruptive behavior from a cohort of mostly young but very powerful businesses that seek to digitalize the world's economies, cultures and relationships.

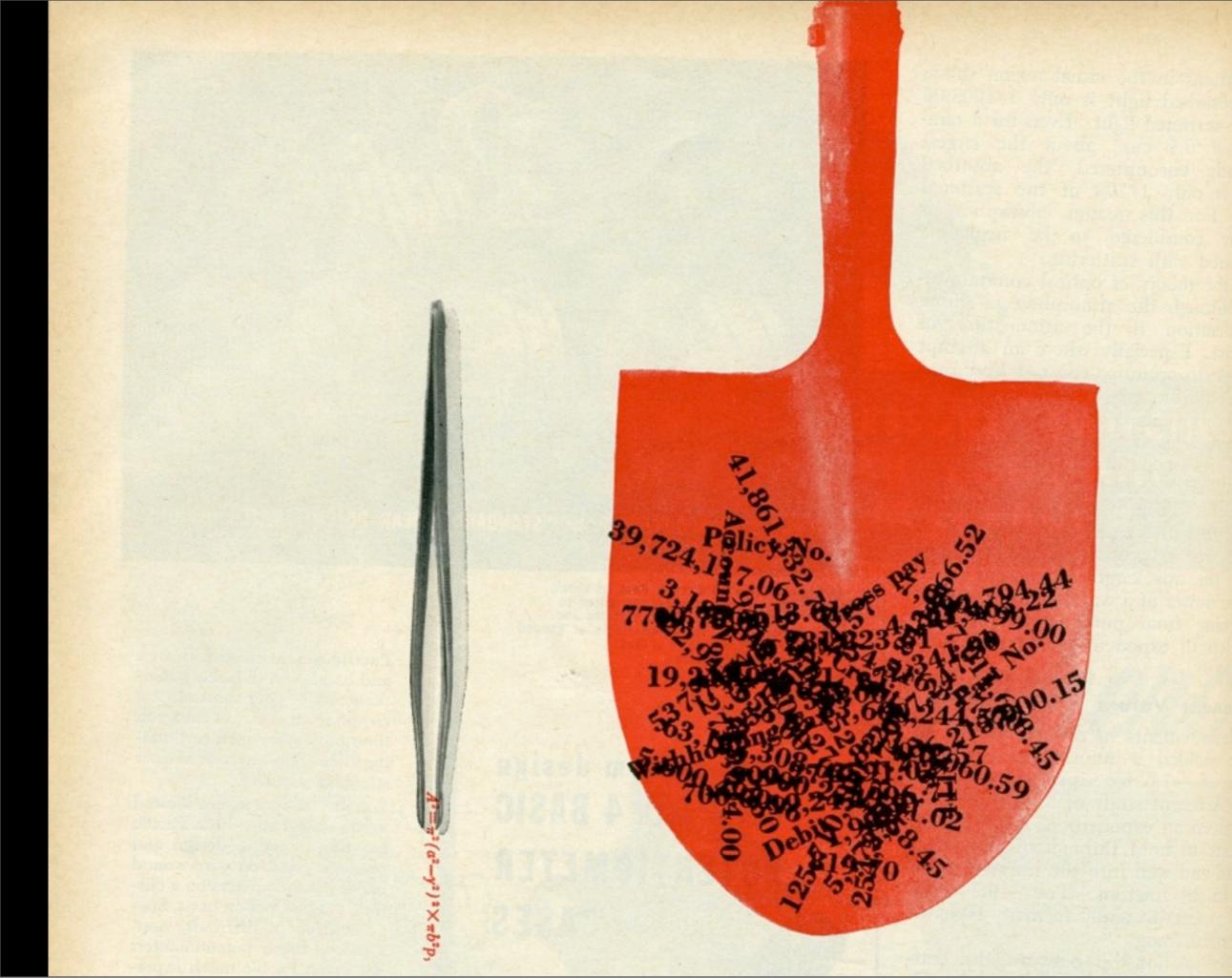
5

But this is not the entire story. Archives are more resilient than many might think. If we question some of our unexamined beliefs and assumptions, experiment with new workflows, new forms of access and new economic models, we have a shot at living through the complicated years. Most important — I think we can live and work less anxiously.

Les pinces rappelant les grosses pattes de l'écrevisse, sont des organes de bataille et d'information. ...are instruments of aggression and information

Sunday, April 19, 15

The digital turn is no different than other disruptive waves of industrialization and, I must say, austerity. Its promoters naturalize its power to overturn by invoking the old idea of "creative destruction" and proclaiming that there are no alternatives. Its sense of inexorability has roots in countercultures (as the scholar Fred Turner found) as well as in finance and engineering, and it is promoted day and night. Despite its apparent victory, digitality is fragile. It requires a compliant social order, the accommodation of governments, and the steady availability of energy. It is not a monolith; the Chinese digital world works differently than the North American. And its corporate structures and business models are experimental. We cannot overreact today to a force that will behave differently tomorrow.

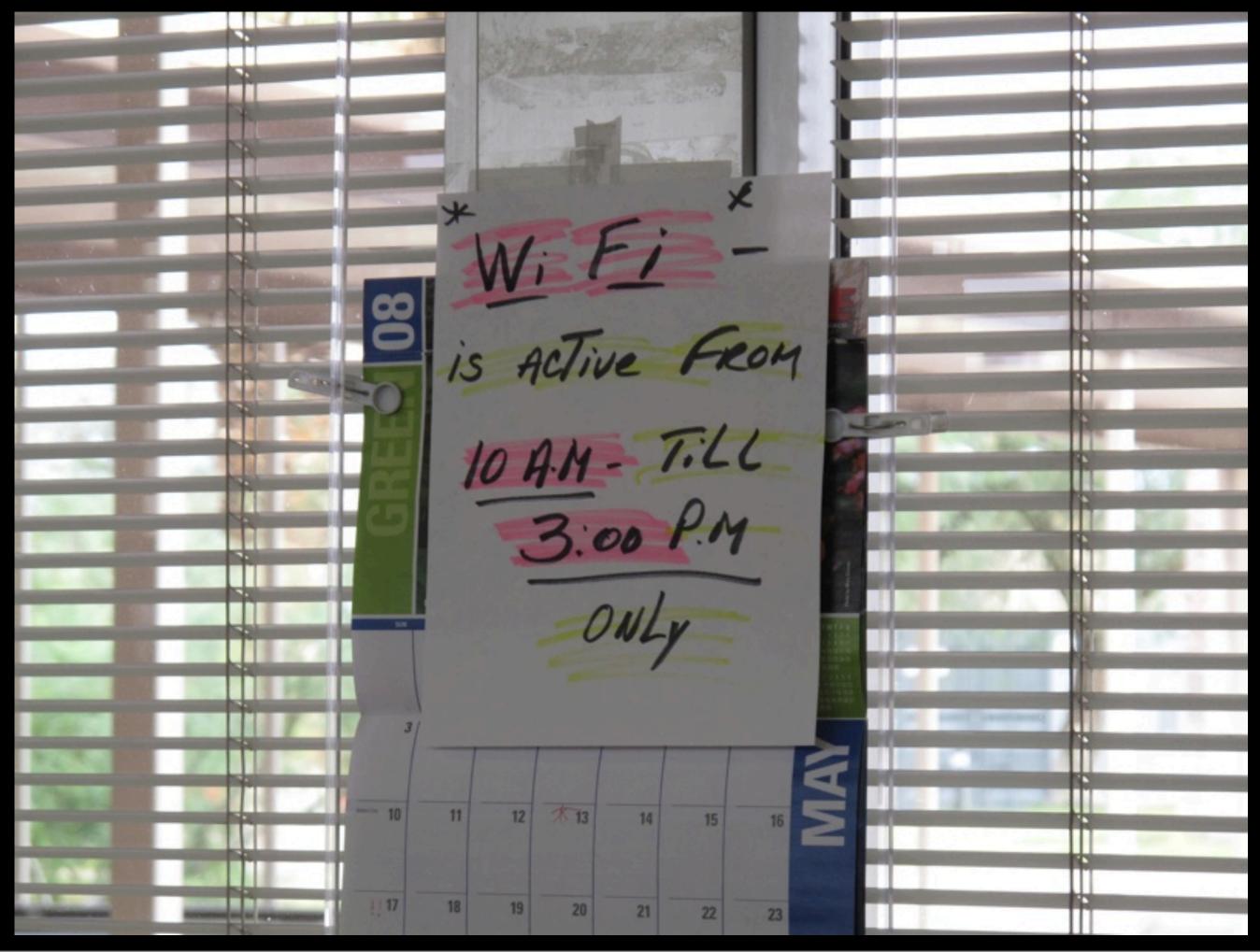


I think of the relationship between archives and the threats that surround us as asymmetric, but not in the same way it once was. Even if we were smaller and weaker than large corporations (at first the studios, now Internet companies), we were centralized, complacent, defensive. We circled the wagons to protect our collections and our very existence. But now the big dotcoms are becoming lumbering bureaucracies, and we have an opportunity to outthink them and to be more nimble. There are engineers who would prefer to work for us than for a Google. 7

Some of us feel we have come late to the battle. This is not bad. In so doing we have avoided making premature decisions and made time to observe the enemy. Incrementalism, which might perhaps have appeared to be a loser's strategy, is in fact radically traditional.



Many of the world's great libraries acted out of fear and perhaps a sense of inferiority when they signed secret agreements with Google to take pictures of their books. This has not changed the world in the way we thought it would, even though the libraries gave Google the books. For the moment we are in a phase when books see less use than a generation ago. This condition existed before Google began to scan. There was nothing of the library in Google's search-and-advertising model. There is still very little of film archives that surfaces in the embryonic online models we have built or seen. We can still think freely about the terms with which we engage those who would take our collections online. And it's now clear that digitization is not a one-time project, just as film to film copying has been done over and over again as technology and our skills improve. The first scan is not an all-or-nothing proposition.



Bits are not the enemy; they signify a different operational model of the world. Yes, a new culture is built from them, and amnesia about what came before often prevails, but digital culture is just as fragile as digitality. It's a new system of labor that only thinks it's free, and it's exhausting its consumers. Maintaining my new cellphone, my social media, my email, my computer and fixing broken systems is at least a halftime job. I get impatient when a European contact won't reply to my emails on the weekend, but I envy the higher value you place on your time.

9

In my work with our library and archives I have come to realize that digital and physical are not opposites but complementaries. Each has a different job to do and each is waiting to work with the other. The turn to digital revalidates the analog. But it is not quite the same as it was — it's hybridized with digital. I make digital films that play before audiences who talk while the film plays. I thought this was a radical move, until I realized what I was doing actually recalled the Elizabethan theater with the loud and boisterous groundlings in the front pit, letting the actors and the rest of the audience know what they thought about the show. Hybridized analog and digital.



Books have a new cachet and book sales are rising again. It is inconceivable to me that an increasingly thoughtful and educated audience will completely reject film exhibition, once they have learned the flaws of its replacements. Recorded sound didn't kill performance. Industrial production and distribution models did not kill the need to gather in physical spaces and experience collective presence. Capitalism has adapted to foreground certain kinds of digital objects, but it can adapt back.



Film and the theatrical cinema experience are now languishing in the valley of neglect. There seems to be a period of indifference, a period of latency, late in their first life and before their rebirth, when physical objects are widely seen as a liability. This is the period when barges full of nitrate film, television kinescopes and recording masters were dumped off coastlines; the age of secretive transports of books from libraries; the age when VHS tapes are thrown in boxes and put on the street for homeless people to comb through and resell. (though Yale University just acquired 2700 horror features on VHS). But at some point the artifact regains its cachet. The theatrical experience is in eclipse, but it will not die.

If we see archives as long-term propositions, not temporary structures, we can take time to ponder our rules of engagement with digitality. But there is NO excuse for not engaging.

THE ROBOT SINGS

OF LOVE

THE ROBOT (singing): "O, soul of my soul, I love thee—"

BUT the Robot has no soul. And having no soul, It cannot love. Small wonder the lady spurns Its suit.

Now, if the Robot cuts a ridiculous figure beneath a lady's balcony, why expect IT to thrill intelligent theatre goers in the character of Canned Music?

Music is an emotional art. By means of it, feeling may be translated into all tongues. The Robot, having no capacity for feeling, cannot produce music in a true sense.

÷

You can join in rebuking the proposal that mechanical music is adequate fare for the American intellect by joining the Music Defense League. Sign and mail the coupon.

AMERICAN

MUSICIANS

WNED TAUS

HE

Comprising 140,000 professional municians in the United States and Canada JOSEPH N. WEBER, President, 1440 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

F

-

Sunday, April 19, 15

Historians describe a practice they call presentism. We are presentist when we apply current modes of thinking to the past and future. Right now it is tempting to eternalize the present and imagine a future based on disturbing trends that have not been with us for very long. It is short-term thinking to regard the apparent end of film and the collapse of the photochemical manufacturing chain as the definitive threat to film culture. It is presentism to regard digitality as the negation of film culture, or, for that matter, to think of digitality as the negation of analog culture. Deeply-held feelings of cinephilia drive us to read current history in apocalyptic terms.

FED

a server and

ER

erican Federation of Musicians 1440 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

LD-8-4

da

Sinefili		κινηματογ	γραφοφιλίας
cinefilie	סינעפיליאַ		cinefília
		filmofilije	
シネフィル	cinefilia		Cinephilie
синефилия		синефіли	시네필
cinéphilie	cineph	ilia Zir	nemazaletasunak
az igazi mozirajongó			
цинепхили	Ia		translate.google.com

In our own ways, we are all cinephiles. But cinephilia may not be serving us well. Cinephilia is no defense against precarity or competition. Cinephilia doesn't convince budget controllers or uninterested citizens of the urgency of our work. We need to be more than cinephiles.

We need to articulate reasons for our practice, not simply accept it on an unspoken level We need to look outward beyond our walls and beyond our parent organizations 13

We need to advocate for our institutions, and for the field itself

We need to understand that even if we work in a private institution or deep within a government department, we are effectively working for everyone and for those of us not yet born

To properly serve the records we collect and preserve, we need to do more than love them

Films are powerful, but they lack the power to preserve the institutions that save them.

A crisis in the history of the Nation is upon us. If the common good is to be served, an economics of scarcity must give way to one of abundance. The right of a man to his own exists within the commonwealth; he may do as he pleases with that which is his property. But liberty and property stop short at the line marked out by the general welfare. Long ago law joined policy to decree that no man is to exploit his wealth in such a way as to create a scarcity, make for a lower standard of life, or drive a barrier between a people and their resources. The great task of Government is to realize these ancient values in the conduct of the modern industrial republic; to this great task the productive genius of a people must be encouraged to contribute, unrestrained by private claims in the economy. The imprisonment of invention and production spells doom; the nation which discovers how to release to mankind the great storehouse of creative energy shall inherit the earth.

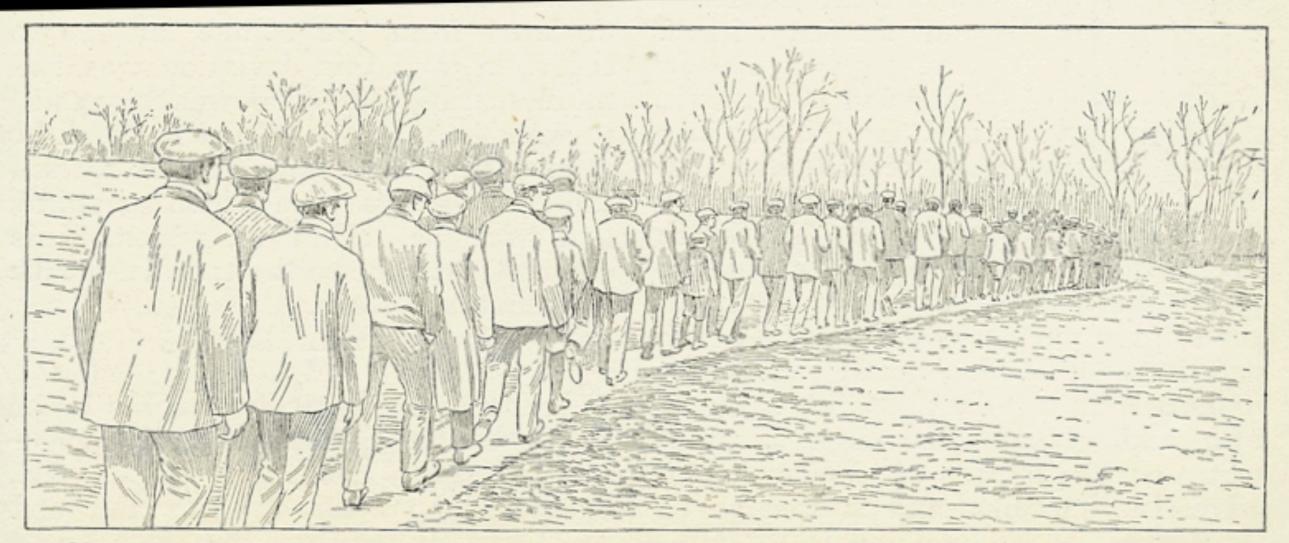
Walton Hamilton, *Patents and Free Enterprise*. U.S. Congress, Temporary National Economic Committee, Investigation of Concentration of Economic Power, Monograph No. 31, 1941.

Sunday, April 19, 15

Cinephilia quite naturally engenders the desire to love and protect. And we have become overprotective. There is too much force majeure in the archives world; we're tasked with enforcing rules not of our making. We have earned the right to greater autonomy from those who own or claim rights and we have earned the right to make our collections available.

Our work is hobbled by a precautionary mindset. We are still excessively deferential to nonexistent claims from

unidentified rightsholders who may not even exist. Those that do exist may not respect the work that we do to protect their rights. Most archivists are socialized from the beginning of their professional training to assume that archival materials are all someone else's intellectual property, which may not always be the case. I can understand how we must often comply with obviously anachronistic laws, but I have a difficult time understanding why we so often stop short of questioning them.

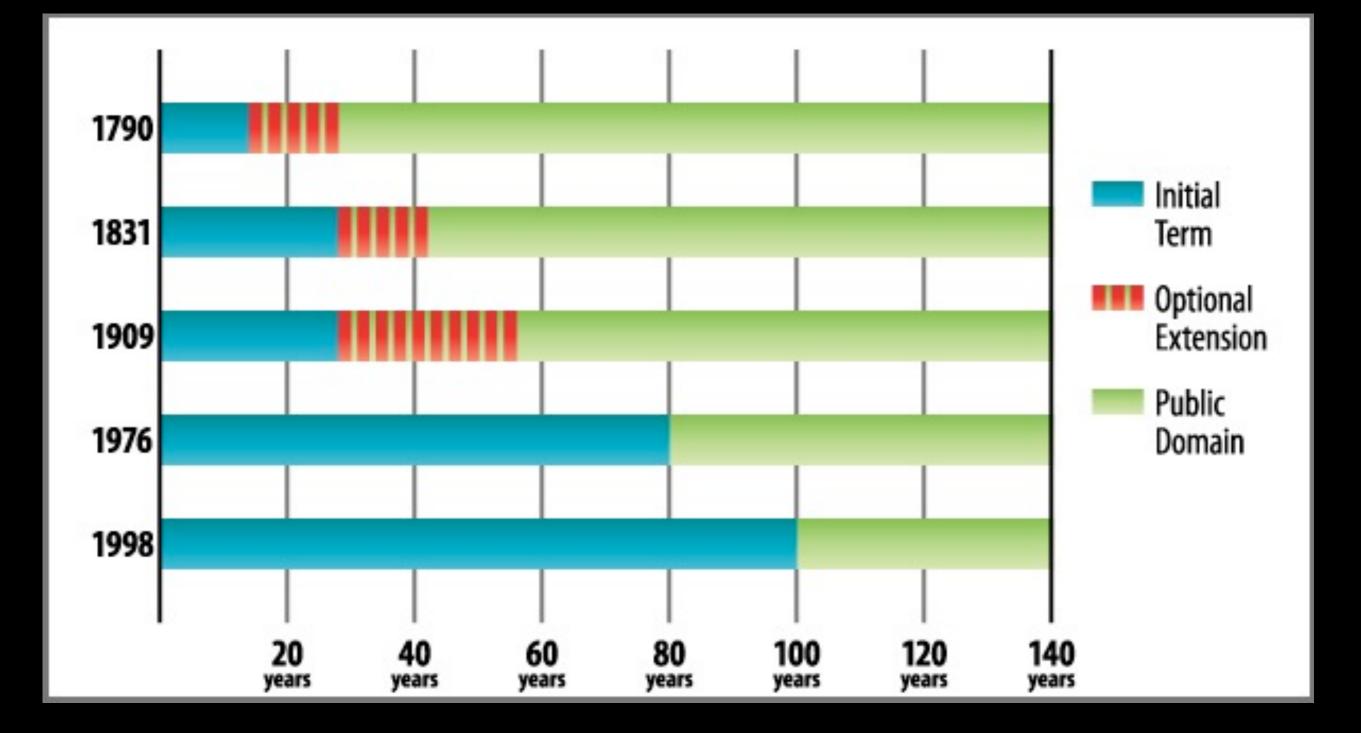


Marching over Private Ground to Re-Establish a Footpath and Assert the Public Right to Use It

How do we want to think about copyright as laws evolve? I don't want to go deeply into specifics, but I am concerned about two issues: extended collective licensing, which has been popular in European policy circles and is being discussed seriously in the US; and questions that transcend short-term copyright disputes.

ECL is a real problem. The regularization of orphan works concerns me as well. Melissa Terras has been doing a great series of blogposts about the new UK regime. Who will these collective licensing organizations be, how much will they cost to administer, and who will get the money? And why should individuals go through the same process that a major publisher or studio must go through? Could we have built Internet Archive under ECL or a regularized orphan works regime?

And as cultural custodians, we're obliged to take the long view, which means we cannot postpone thinking about issues that last longer than copyright and pose more profound questions. For instance, how can we temper openness with kindness and respect? Questions of Aboriginal, indigenous or community cultural and intellectual property rights, and the moral rights of creators, all pose issues that go far beyond the bounds of copyright. These issues will outlive shorter-term discussions and are part of shaping the kind of world we hope to live in.



https://web.law.duke.edu/cspd/publicdomainday/2014/shrinking

Sunday, April 19, 15

I recognize it is a bit unfair for someone from the United States, where we have a rich public domain even if its growth is stunted, to be critical of copyright regimes around the world. I must also admit that the US is a motivating force behind Draconian treaty-based IP initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, now being negotiated in secret. But wherever anachronistic copyright laws exist, we need to question the reason for their existence and work to change regulations that no longer protect real interests.



Archival privilege — the right to control the dissemination of archival materials, whether exercised by archival custodians or copyright owners — relied on scarcity. Archives can't control the spread of their holdings any more. Archival privilege is also closely related to generational divides. The kind of archival work that's being made by younger makers is sometimes hard for archives to understand and support. This is a problem on the supply side, and it rhymes with a problem on the demand side – the difficulty of getting material out of many archives has led many younger authors and mediamakers to regard archives as obstacles to use rather than enablers of use.

17

We sometimes worry about the "loss of control" when moving images propagate too freely, especially in digital form. By contrast, it's the enclosed archives, collections deprived of their potential to thrill, educate and change minds, that makes me anxious.



Isolation and defensiveness have led some of us to see our work not as a means to an end but as an end in itself. I think poets, musicians and experimental artists might have more justification to think this way than we do. If the archives is to be a point of origin and the birthplace of new works, rather than the place films go to die, we've got to rebuild the lifecycle of archival material around reuse and, as many of our colleagues in textually based repositories are learning, put users at the center.

We know that the demand for most of our collections is miniscule. But we can try and increase it through aggressive efforts to expand access. I disagree with the idea that's been stated that "access" is a neoliberal term principally implying consumption. I would prefer to think of access as the process, or perhaps better the continuum, that enables the human right to participate in the making of culture and the making of history. If I oppose the neoliberal attacks on public institutions and the attempt to put a price on everything, the last thing I would wish to do would be to increase scarcity. I am deeply fascinated by the discussions of film curatorship and the film museum, which correspond to the vital discussions on convergence now occurring in the museum, library and archives worlds, but I want to figure out how we can build museums with permeable walls. Bits flow through walls much better than paintings.

The accessible archives:

Treats access as a key part of its mission, not an afterthought Reconfigures its workflows to expand access and use Limits access to collections only as required by law, respect, custom and unavoidable constraint Makes materials available before they're requested Measures value by consumptive use Seeks out new users Brings archives into the community and community into the archives Sees archival activity as a civic function Builds transactional spaces Avoids being hobbled by the precautionary principle

Every one of these attributes of accessible archives is hopeful:

describe a few

"The objective of archival policy in a democratic country cannot be the mere saving of paper; it must be nothing less than the enriching of the complete historical consciousness of the people as a whole..."

Robert C. Binkley, 1939

Sunday, April 19, 15

It is certainly clear that we cannot offer free access to all cultural resources. And yet, as we explain the rationales for enclosure and make our excuses as to why certain materials are not publicly available, we have the responsibility to specify (as clearly as we can) why we can't release a record, how and when it will be released and by whom. If we can't offer openness, we must at least plan for it. And I want to emphasize: an openness plan should specify which records we will declare to be outside the realm of property.

EXPERIMENTS

Sunday, April 19, 15

We have a lot of practical problems that we cannot easily dismiss, but we can alter the way we think about them. In the Film Curatorship conversations, David Francis said: "I'd love to find somebody to fund an experimental archive...where we could try out ideas without having to worry about the financial implication, and where we could try and put into practice the ideas we are talking about theoretically. I would just like to have the ability to change, represent, and rethink until we got things right." (Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Francis,

22

Alexander Horwath, Michael Loebenstein, Film Curatorship, 106)

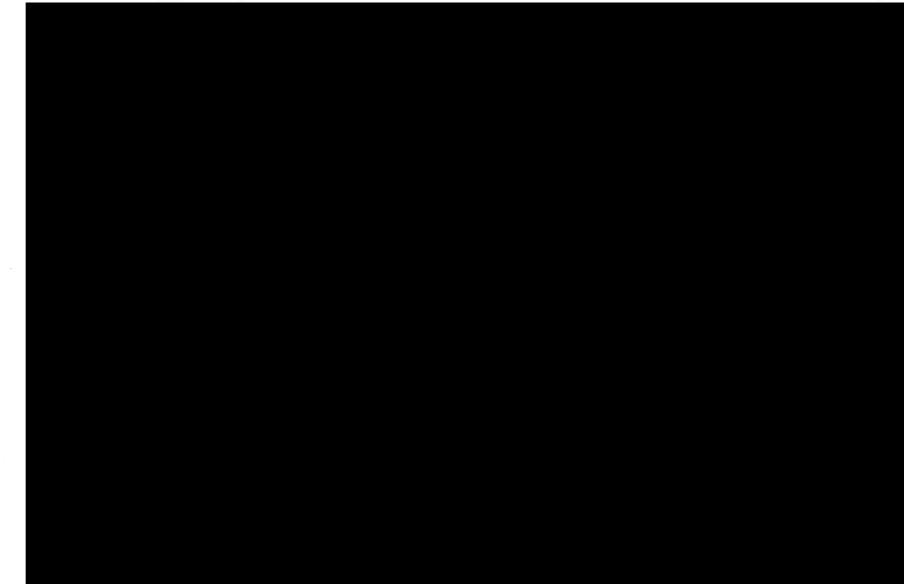
Librarians are doing this. People in the digital humanities are doing this. If the archives is to adopt some of the trappings of the museum, it might also remember to build a laboratory. I do not suggest huge, expensive projects, but modest experiments that address unresolved difficulties.

MANUAL ON METHODS of REPRODUCING RESEARCH MATERIALS

A Survey made for the Joint Committee on Materials for Research of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies

<text><section-header><text><text><text><text><text>

The field of original record is so vast that the conclusion must be self-evident; only the recruiting of forces supplementary to those of professional scholars and research libraries will bring ample and intelligent action in the preserving of old records, in the selection of contemporary records for preservation, and in the making of new records.



Sunday, April 19, 15

We bemoan the digital firehose — the flood of undifferentiated production that is impossible to appraise, describe, contextualize, and collect, let alone preserve. But I find myself more interested in the backlogs of physical film that seem to defy efforts to process them. Could we bring nonprofessionals into the back of the archives to work with materials, annotate, repair, conserve, prepare for copying and scanning? Could we build what I'm calling participatory physical archives? I ran a two-year experiment supervised by Selznick-trained archivists, and we did minimal processing and scanning preparation on 4,800 out of a 12,000-item home movie collection. It was not a total success, but we exchanged paraprofessional archival training for film work that would otherwise go undone. We let the public in the back of the archives, so to speak, not just in the gallery or research room.

Could we bring the best makers into the archives to work with us and make new films from our collections? Imagine the archives as a place of production, where films are made, games coded, websites designed, books written, TV produced and transmitted. And, when possible, look to archivists to do some of this work themselves. There's a longtime idea, sometimes elevated to ethic, that archivists and archives should not engage in research or production themselves. But I think we could let the longtime antinomy between roles of archivist and producer rest.



Could we operate creative laboratories that focus not only on making new works but on remaking archival workflows themselves? Libraries and textual archives (and now AMIA) sponsor hackathons — sessions where people make new software tools. From the early printers at the National Film Archive — to shorter pitch sprockets machined to handle shrunken film — to the many DIY scanner projects we see on YouTube — to David Rice's apps to analyze digital video streams, the roots of archival workflow are in do-it-yourself culture as much, if not more than cinema arts.



We lament that so little of our material is of interest to researchers and producers. Well, why don't we consider paying people to use our collections? In fact, we already do this, with commissions, contests, residencies. I'm not being facetious when I suggest that if our mission is to push historical and cultural materials out into a crowded and often indifferent present, then it might be appropriate to find more adventurous ways of encouraging the use of our material.



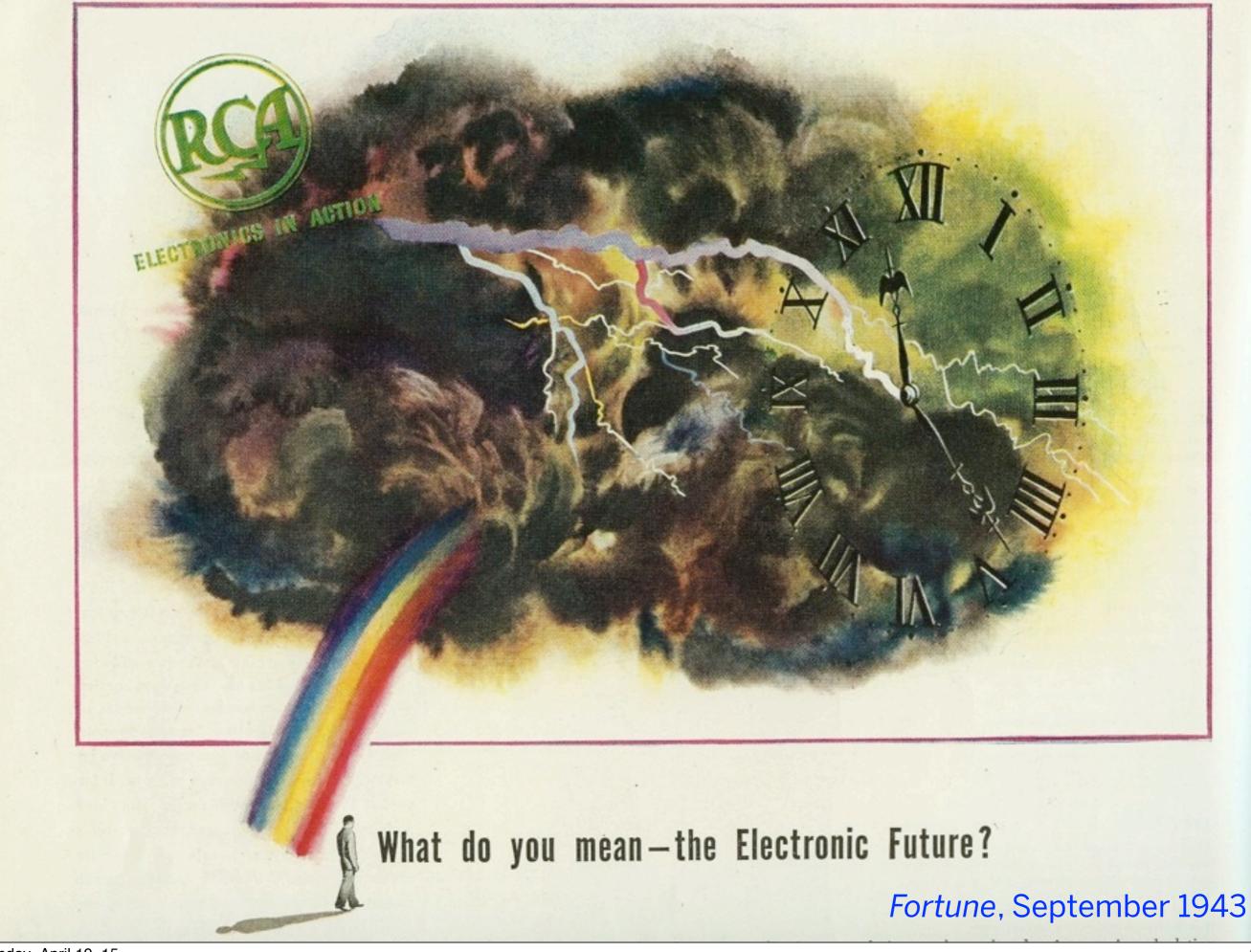


I suspect that one way to become clearer about our course is to reinvest the archives with a sense of intentionality. Each moving image record was created for a reason, and the intentionality of particular records coalesce into the archives, but a tradition of archival neutrality keeps us from fixing on intentions, missions and outcomes. We need to do much more than preserve the cultural heritage for the future. And archivists should be encouraged to play much more of an interpretive role themselves.

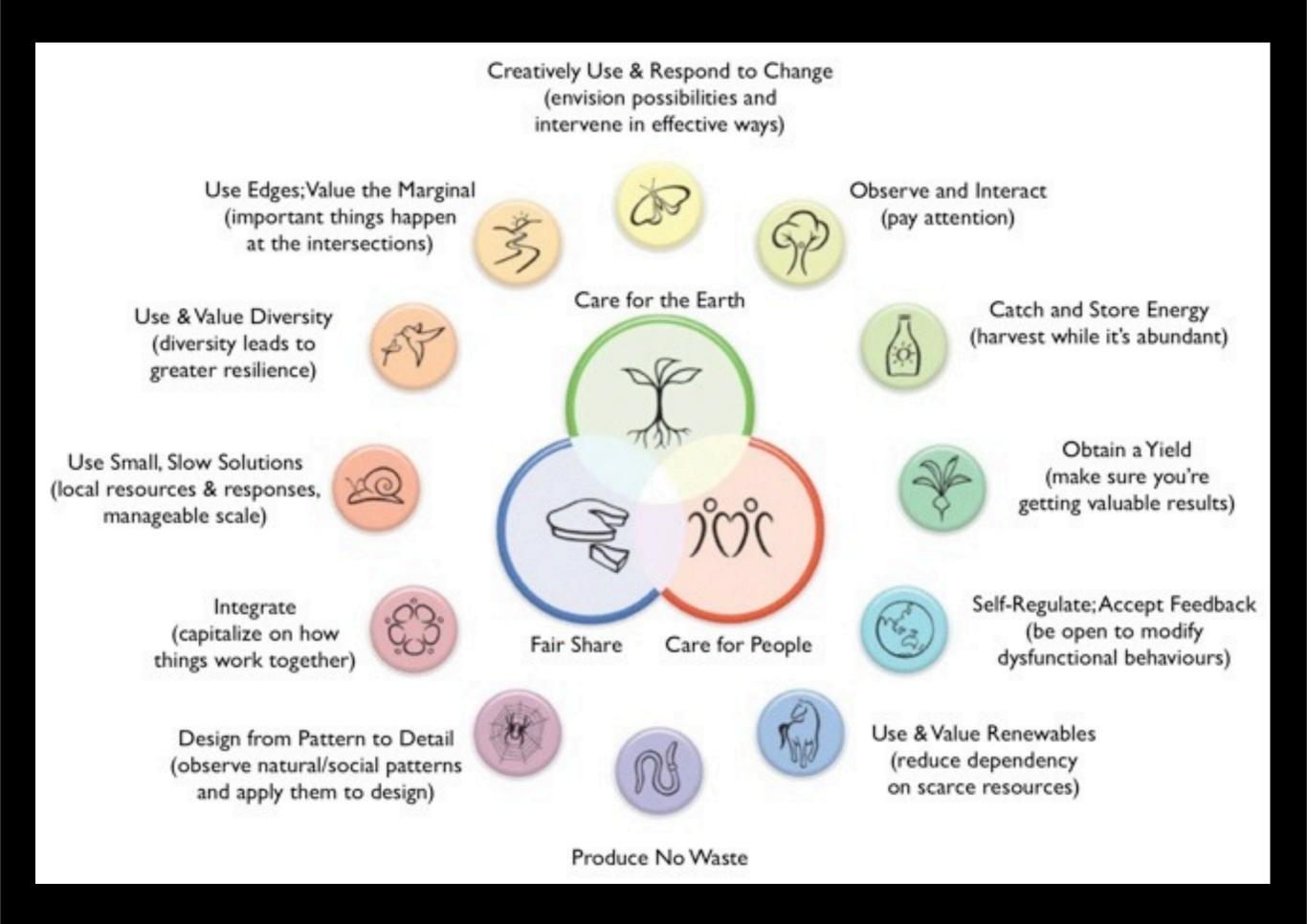


We could address the misunderstandings about archival work. We could push forward a bundle of new narratives that speak to the centrality of archives in the world. Because to engage in archival activity is to intervene in history's flow. Even a passive collection that simply responds to queries plays an interventionist role.

Horvath: "an archive that is also a "critical museum"; a confrontation of concrete artefacts and social practices; an actively and poetically constructed collection; a place in which curatorial thinking and work can be felt and argued with. It would stand counter to the ideology of the market." (Film Curatorship, 82)



Sunday, April 19, 15 Possible futures.



I also suspect environmental thinking and ecocriticism could contribute frameworks to archival thinking. Lately I'm looking at the permaculture principles diagram, which at least at some points around the clock could be read as an archival manifesto.

I'm also interested in the issue of archival accountability seen through an environmental prism. Could we consider putting our intentions and desired outcomes on the record through preservation and access impact statements? This thought is not unrelated to the recent discussions around collection policies, by the way. [further explanation was provided]

MAKE PEACE WITH THEORY

Sunday, April 19, 15

Our conversations about archives suffer from an excess of practicality. While some of us engage in reflection (I refer especially to a number of important recent articles in the Journal of Film Preservation, The Moving Image, and elsewhere), but quite often these initiatives do not percolate through the field.



Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, UK

Sunday, April 19, 15

Theorists who do not work in archives project all sorts of ideas onto what they call "the archive." For them archives can be blank screens, even playthings. And scholars and producers regard us as repositories for what they WISH we collected made available in the ways they WANT to use it. We spend a lot of time resisting the identities projected onto us. But only a few scholars speak with archivists directly. Few have spent even a day rewinding film, or shifting cans from one vault to another, or

digitizing videotape. Workflow is almost totally absent in academic discussions of "the archive." And yet workflow is far more political, far more potent in its effects on on archives than a hundred conferences.



Rick Prelinger @footage · Feb 3

The "archive" is overtheorized; "archives" (where the labor of record keeping takes place) are undertheorized and underfunded. #archives

h 1 152 ★ 172 ili •••

3 Feb 2015

Sunday, April 19, 15

Despite the gap between "the archive" and archives, between theory that takes little account of what archives really are and what they do, we need to harvest ideas that we can use. There is a rapidly growing corpus of thought about "the archive" that rarely takes account of actual archives. But some of it is valuable, even urgent for us to engage with.



Rick Prelinger retweeted

Natalia Cecire @ncecire · Feb 28

If all you can get out of your archival materials is that they matter, then they do not in fact matter.

- 17 3 🛨 28 •••



Rick Prelinger retweeted

Natalia Cecire @ncecire · Feb 28

Those talks on archival materials that conclude sanctimoniously, but worst of all *boringly,* that "archives matter":



28 Feb 2015

Sunday, April 19, 15

I hesitated a long time before mentioning this today, but I find an empty center in many of our discussions. Since the very beginning of the film archives movement, I think there's been a steady retreat from explaining why we engage in collecting and preserving film, why archives exist and why they're important, and what our goals might be. It is certainly possible that one of the archivist's less celebrated skills is the ability to hide, to maintain a safe environment for collections by staying under the radar. And of course we have had to hide from rights owners who would repossess materials and bureaucrats who might not understand the importance of what we do. This is understandable, but we cannot continue to rely on oversimplified, inoffensive, celebratory statements geared for public consumption. The quiet we often maintain facing out is matched by a quiet looking in. For the most part, moving image archives exist in a kind of teleological vacuum. It's good that we exist, but I've yet to see much thoughtful examination as to why.

35

Our work is too complex and difficult to hide behind the missions that are assigned to us: dépot légal, heritage preservation, maintenance of the juridical-administrative-evidential record. But near-religious reasons that cannot be shared with lay people do not rise to the level of justifying the special work we need to do with fragile materials, and they do not give us the ammunition we need to defend ourselves against those who do not consider our work important enough to fund. To actively consider the reasons for our existence actively is also to ask: Could we, as archivists, point ourselves toward an agenda that we wish to make real?



The eminent technological historian David Nye suggests that an eclectic approach to theory makes sense at this point. Speaking about the history of technology, he makes remarks that I think apply well to archival work. (From his keynote at the Society for the History of Technology conference, delivered Dearborn, Michigan, November 2014).

36

"But no grand theory," he says, "is adequate to our interdisciplinary enterprise. If we use concepts carefully with an awareness of their provenance, they can give a theoretical dimension to the history of technology without confining it to a single system of thought.... Many historians of technology practice this principled eclecticism. This bricolage is not just defensible. It is more durable and provides more robust arguments than reliance on any single theory....Because our work is interdisciplinary and multi-vocal, it is impossible to adopt a single method from one of disciplines that we draw upon. Instead, we mine theories for useful concepts that can illuminate the complex relations between human beings and their technologies. We are interdisciplinary because our subject matter is too universal and too complicated to be understood from a single perspective."



When I was young the best holiday present a child could have was an electric train set. But today electric trains have become specialized playthings for adults. Simple wooden train sets are back in vogue. I take this to mean that we cannot necessarily assume that the current fascination with technological tools and digitality will last forever, and that as Raymond Williams suggests, we are living in a culture where the emergent and residual coexist and interact. As we plunge into the digital vortex, I would hope that we remember that core tenet of conservatorship – reversibility of process. Let us not deny change, but let us also remember that much of the future will lie in the unresolved past.

rick@ucsc.edu @footage

R

Detroit, February 2011

Sunday, April 19, 15 THANK YOU.