

FIAF Congress, Lausanne 2019: From the Past to the Future of Film Archives

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Title: “Education is the passport to the future...” University Archives and their Special Collections in the world of Film Archives

Hello all, I’m very glad to be here so thank you to the Selection Committee for allowing me this opportunity to talk to you today. My title gives you a glimpse into the subject for my talk but I thought I would just explain the quote in its entirety

“Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs only to the people who prepare for it today.” Malcolm X

....Its from a speech that Malcolm X gave at a founding rally for the Organization of African American Unity (OAAU), in 1964, a speech now better known as the ‘By any means necessary’ speech.

This title seems apt to me given the educational environment in which I work but also because of the recent anniversaries in civil rights in the southern states of America, where I am now located, especially the 50th anniversaries of important events that occurred in the 1960s.

Within my unit we have a large amount of footage that we are now using for these Civil Rights events as they cover many of the local events that became nationally known in the fight for Civil Rights in America. This footage has been used widely in many local and national events and documentaries. The History Department of the University was instrumental in helping us identify and recognize key figures in the Civil Rights Movement that were featured in the film footage.

Education really is the key to preserving our own past and although Malcolm X, when giving his speech, was referring to the educational

opportunities afforded African-Americans in America when he talked about education, this quote could apply to many circumstances. I think it aptly applies to our own field and I know that is something that FIAF and its members will probably agree with, as you can plainly see from the many training and outreach events, and summer and winter schools organized and supported by this wonderful organization.

You have already heard today about the National Archives in various countries, of which there are many representatives here in attendance at FIAF meetings but as well you know there are many other different types of film archives out there.

Many of these archives and archival units are housed and funded by Universities. We use educational funds to pay for our history and invest in its preservation as a resource for students to utilize, in the hope that they will appreciate its true worth. These students that we serve and train, in the use of these materials, are the key to preserving these objects, not only for their own generation but for generations to come.

Let me tell you a bit more about where I am coming from. The University of South Carolina was established in 1801 as the state supported South Carolina College and has been educating students of all ages for over 200 years.

Now within this University you have the Library system....

Many University Libraries that house film collections do so because they began as an outreach service to provide films that were rented out for low fees to schools, colleges, universities, public libraries, clubs and organizations. At the University of South Carolina the Educational Film unit started in the 1950s and grew to hundreds of 16mm films that were both made by the University's Instructional Services Division or purchased by the Library.

In the 1970's, the Educational Film Collection started purchasing and renting videocassettes instead of the much more expensive 16mm films and copied many films over onto video, however, the film collection continued to circulate, and most of the films were not discarded with the

changeover in format. As a result the Collections we house include many films that came from the Educational Film Collection, however this is not how MIRC began.

MIRC, the Moving Image Research Collections of the University, was once called the Film Library and even more recently the Newsfilm Library, in reference to the gift that officially started the Unit in earnest. You may notice the cards that I put in your inboxes - on the back it states the old name - the Newsfilm Library and until recently so did the signage on our entrance.

MIRC officially started in 1980 when the gift of the Fox Movietone News Collection established the archive.

This collection comprises more than 2,000 hours of edited stories, complete newsreels, and associated outtakes from the silent Fox News and sound Fox Movietone News Library, dating from 1919-1934 and from 1942-1944. Now you are probably wondering how on earth the University of South Carolina manage to acquire an important newsfilm collection.

In the early 1970s, Jim Jackson, a faculty member at the University of South Carolina, wanted the entire library brought to USC for educational purposes and proposed a PBS series, narrated by Lowell Thomas, built around newsreel footage from the Fox library. The series, Lowell Thomas Remembers, launched in 1976 and ran successfully for several seasons on PBS stations nationwide.

Conversations with the University of South Carolina became more focused when on 7 December 1978, 12 million feet of irreplaceable Universal News footage, held by the National Archives and Records Administration went up in flames (the nitrate film stock being highly flammable), Fox executives grew concerned about the health and future of its own nitrate newsreel library. Remember also that Fox had lost a large majority of its silent film production archive in a large nitrate fire in New Jersey in 1937 as well so this might have had some effect on the decision.

Two annual deeds of gift were signed before the deal began to unravel. Fox's new owner, oilman Marvin Davis, had used the value of the

Movietone News library as part of the collateral required for his hostile takeover of Twentieth Century-Fox. Davis had no intention of giving away any more of the company's assets to the University. By this time the University had already received 7 million feet of original nitrate elements and 4 million feet of safety film transfers made by Fox.

Although not the enormous gift originally envisioned, the University of South Carolina's Fox Movietone News Collection is nonetheless extremely impressive. This gift was highly publicized by the University at that time and not only launched the film archive but, to this day, is still the christening collection that people refer to when they enquire of our collections. This publicity brought about many other organisations and individuals to bringing film and video to the 'Home of Fox Movietone News' and enabled what is now known as MIRC to establish itself as a collector of archival film.

Since then, archival holdings have increased to over 8,000 hours of footage in five main collecting areas: Newsfilm Collections, Regional Film Collections, the Chinese Film Collection, Science and Nature Films and Military Films Collections including the new repository of the United States Marine Corps films.

MIRC concentrates on preserving films and videos produced outside the American feature film industry and we are now among the largest film archives in the United States. However, we are not as well known as we would like--even on our own campus. We are working to amend that, hence my talk here today.

So we are a living and growing archive and still take in film and video from donors although we have now brought collecting policies into play to narrow down our focus as no archive has unlimited space available to them, either physically or now digitally as well.

At the last count we had more than 15,000 reels of nitrate film, 40,000 reels of safety film and over 20,000 video tapes. All in all, that's more than 10,000 hours of materials on 35mm, 16mm, 8mm and Super8mm films and various types of video formats from 2inch down to miniDVs.

This equates to an estimated 11 million feet on 35mm film, 7 million of it Nitrate, 5 million feet on 16mm safety film and over 200,000 feet in small gauge formats.

Many of these films can be viewed for free through MIRC's Digital Video Repository, mirc.sc.edu. As of this writing, more than 11,300 digitized films are available to view online.

Education

And so I come to the crux of the matter – education. This is key to the future of film archives. We need to educate others as well as ourselves. We need to let people know that we are here and about what we do.

At USC I believe that we do that in a number of different ways. We directly educate the students by offering them class tours, internships and research opportunities. We show them the physical aspects of film and video in explanations of its history, processes and the many genres of film that do not come from Hollywood. We speak to them and show them a world beyond the screen, a world that does not get shown on television, in the cinema or on You Tube.

We let them explore the images that are contained within newsfilm and documentaries and use them for their research and class projects. We encourage them to look beyond the material that is already out there and to search for primary materials that have not yet been seen. We have students from all kinds of disciplines coming to us for internships and projects, not just film and media or history departments.

This is of enormous advantage to a new generation of people who have grown up on DVDs, and digital media, many of which already don't know about video tape, never mind film on reels. We allow students with no prior film handling experience the chance to get their hands on and to work with film reels as a part of their internships.

This sort of hands on experience that exists beyond a museum setting is key to creating a knowledge base in the minds of the next generation of

media users. It will remind them of worlds outside of the screen bubble and create curiosity into the realm of physical media that will guarantee the need for archives in the future because it is only when the need still exists that we shall be able to also exist.

Going back to my original quote:

“Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs only to the people who prepare for it today.” Malcolm X

I believe we are preparing for the future today by schooling our students for a future that looks back upon the past and educating them in a way as to make that past meaningful to them.