

FIAF Cataloguing Commission Occasional Paper No. 1

FORMATS, FORMATS, FORMATS

by

Carlos Roberto de Souza
Cinemateca Brasileira

August 1992

FORMATS, FORMATS, FORMATS

During the last 30 years, all of us, working in film archives, have been directly or indirectly involved with the use of computers.

The computers entered in our lives - or at least are expected to do so - in order to facilitate our jobs: no need to separate into several paper cards the entry of an item into the collection - one for the country of origin, one for the director, others for the main actors and actresses, and still another one for the film entry number. The computer can develop this task itself, although it is also true that to change sometimes an already entered information you may need to handle - and I mean by hand - hundreds or thousands of records. Anyway, this seems more pleasant than typewriting on paper all the thousands of corresponding cards.

However, the use of computers in a film archive involves many decisions based on the knowledge of various issues, as carefully described by Roger Smither in his study Evaluating Computer Cataloguing Systems: a Guide for Film Archivists, prepared for the FIAF Cataloguing Commission.

One of the questions involved in the implementation of the use of computers in film archives is that of the so-called FORMAT. We are not talking, here, about display formats. On this issue, we have the FIAF Cataloguing Rules for Film Archives, prepared by the Cataloguing Commission, and published "to provide a means of facilitating the exchange of information between and among archives, so that cataloguing records, created in one archive, may be readily interpreted and understood in another." [Introduction]

The FORMAT problem is so serious that before facing it, the FIAF Cataloguing Commission needed to undertake parallel studies on some data standardization questions, such as the FIAF Cataloguing Rules already referred to, a polyglot glossary published as the FIAF Glossary of Filmographic Terms, and a set of guidelines for recording technical data Terms and Methods for Technical Archiving of Audio Visual Material, undertaken with the FIAF Preservation Commission and published earlier this year.

After all what is FORMAT, this apparently extremely difficult subject?

FORMAT, in this context, is a data structure, a predefined way of recording information so that records and parts of records can be identified and related.

For instance, the information related to the direction of a particular film, say AMARCORD - if we want to have the computer reading FELLINI, FEDERICO as the film's director without having to enter the word "director," we must first set up a separate field for "film director" within the format. Furthermore, it is MANDATORY that this information be input into the correct field, let us say 2001; otherwise the computer will not be able to read it as AMARCORD's "director." If we want the 2001 field to accept more than one name, (e.g., TAVIANI, PAOLO and TAVIANI, VITORIO), this also has to be foreseen in the FORMAT.

FORMATS, FORMATS, FORMATS, p. 2.

FORMAT (we may also call it Field Definition Table) allows the division of data into records, fields, and subfields - giving each one a category. In short, Format is the information structured in such a way that the computer may read it.

The use of computers in different countries, proportionally according to their development and standardization degrees, caused differences in FORMAT definitions.

Many acronyms emerged - MARC, USMARC, UNIMARC, CCF, CEPAL, and so forth. Most of them meant nothing to moving image archivists, especially in developing countries (Latin America, Africa and Asia) where there is a lack of experience in the library sciences.

What do these acronyms mean? They are only different FORMAT standards for machine intercommunication among groups of users.

When suggesting the project for a FIAF FORMAT definition, the Cataloguing Commission supposes that the members of the Federation have among their aims machine-readable intercommunication, and that adopting a common FORMAT will facilitate this.

Let us suppose, for instance, that in a near future we will be able to send to the FIAF Secretariat a light and flexible floppy disk containing our contributions for the new issue of EMBRYO - instead of a pack with dozens of typewritten cards that would have to be retyped in Brussels and then later printed in a bulky book. To make this possible, it is fundamental that, worldwide, the archives input the film title in the X field and the film length in the Y field. That is: the entry of information must be standardized.

What will the adoption of a common format mean for FIAF archives, many of whom have established computer systems and some of whom have been using computers for decades?

Here a clear distinction must be made between formats - which are documents that explain how to identify and locate information, and computer systems - which consist of hardware and software components that actually store and manipulate data according to the requirements and needs of individual archives. Systems, not formats, govern methods of input (e.g. online or not, with or without templates, etc.) searching (on which fields, with or without shortened word forms, etc.), retrieving (e.g., by individual terms or by terms in combination with one another), sorting (alphabetical or chronological, by which data elements), displaying (abbreviated or full records, explicit or implicit identification of fields) methods of outputting (print, microform, etc.).

FORMATS, FORMATS, FORMATS, p. 3.

As such systems ought to be tailored to the specific needs of archives. Roger Smither, in his previously mentioned text, correctly states that "the most important priority for archives is the quality [and format] of the data entering cataloguing systems, not the specific system used; the transfer between systems of good quality [i.e., historically accurate] data compiled in accordance with a sound and logical structure [i.e., format] does not these days present major problems."

In facing the task ahead of us - the creation of a common FIAF FORMAT, we are all very aware that "standards, once created, cannot remain static, or they will soon become outmoded and eventually disappear" and that "standards must be flexible enough to allow for some variation" (Harriet Harrison, "Report of the Cataloguing Commission to the FIAF Annual Congress," Athens, 15-16 April 1991).

The Executive Committee has given our FIAF FORMAT project a top priority. In order to achieve our goal, it is fundamental that the archives, members and observers, send us, the soonest, copies of the formats they are currently using, so that we may study and compare them in order to reach a suggestion.

We are sure that, to achieve an "official suggestion," we have to receive and study everything that the members and observers have on the subject. And, whenever we get to a final suggestion, it will not be the end, but the beginning of a journey.

Carlos Roberto de Souza
Member of the FIAF Cataloguing Commission
Cinematheca Brasileira
Caixa Postal 12.900
04092 Sao Paulo - SP
BRASIL

Tel: (55-11) 577-4666
FAX: (55-11) 577-7433