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**DEALING WITH THE UNACCEPTABLE**

some ethical issues for  
cataloguing, documentation and programming staff

by

**Roger Smither**  
Department of Film  
Imperial War Museum

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## DEALING WITH THE UNACCEPTABLE: some ethical issues for cataloguing, documentation and programming staff

### Background

Amongst the issues discussed at the Cataloguing Commission's meeting in Sao Paulo (28-30 April 1992) was the topic of the treatment by archives of material which may be considered offensive, either by the archive's staff themselves or by the community outside. How should an archive in a society struggling to eliminate bigotry of various kinds deal with unacceptable attitudes reflected in films from its own less admirable elements, or from other cultures and earlier times? This is a problem from which even the acknowledged classics may not be exempt, the overt racism of The Birth of a Nation providing the most obvious example.

Not all cases will necessarily be cut and dried. Perceptions of what is acceptable vary between cultures and between time periods. There used to be a FIAF joke concerning the 1979 film Caligula; in Britain, it was said, you could see all of the violence but the sex was cut; in Sweden, all of the sex but the violence was cut; in Denmark, however, you could see the whole film. The facts that this joke would no longer necessarily be true in any of the countries concerned, and that the telling of the story itself might be considered by some to be in poor taste, serve further to illustrate the basic point.

Perceptions of what is acceptable will of course vary within a society too. Issues on which such divisions have recently been evident include political ideology, religion and sexual morality. The controversies over films such as Missing, The Deer Hunter and The Last Temptation of Christ offer obvious examples of the first two categories while the last has been a theme for critics virtually since the invention of cinema. The demonstrations outside the 1992 Academy Awards ceremony by gay men and women protesting against negative stereotyping in recent Hollywood films remind us that the question of "acceptable" sexual morality in the movies must be seen from more than one perspective. Material insulting or otherwise harmful to other victims of discrimination and disadvantaged minorities may not have attracted such well-publicised objections, but presents just as great a problem.

### The archive and its masters

There are many ways in which this problem might affect an archive. At its most extreme, the archive's right to acquire or to hold material may be called into question. In any institution relying on state funding, the cry "Is this what the taxpayer's money is being used for?" will signal trouble for the director of that institution - especially when governments are looking for excuses to make cuts. It has been suggested that there could even be calls for the destruction of "offensive" material in an archive's vaults. This possibility, with overtones reminiscent of the Nazis' burning of books, would in itself strike many archivists as morally unacceptable - even if some of the material attacked was of little or no merit, history suggests that a purge or pogrom once started is difficult to control or confine.

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An ethical dilemma of many layers may result for an archive confronted with this kind of official or populist challenge to its activities. Should it reject such interference publicly and risk the further anger of its opponents? Or should it revert to subterfuge, and appear to comply while in fact concealing the material and hoping for a change in attitudes? Should it anticipate the problem even before it arises, and either omit potentially controversial material from its published catalogues or camouflage it under bland or misleading titles?

### The archive and its staff

A further group of problems surrounds the handling of offensive - or potentially offensive - material within archives. Is it reasonable to ask a woman cataloguer to work on a collection of material which may include pornographic films whose very titles she perceives as threatening or degrading? How should an archive react if its black (or gay) staff demand the right to vet, and by implication to edit, catalogue descriptions of films which they felt might be thought to be demeaning to black (or gay) people?

How in any case should an archive's cataloguers truthfully reflect the content of offensive material without seeming to condone the attitudes they are asked to describe? The principle of reference to the original is endorsed by FIAF as the prime method for describing a film; further, normal cataloguing standards insist that the cataloguer work objectively, without imposing value judgements. An accurate description of (for example) an anti-semitic film is, however, itself likely to sound anti-semitic. This can again be a special problem for publicly-funded archives, where inappropriate phrasing may be thought to imply that not only the archive but the government itself endorses such obnoxious views.

### The archive and its users

The problems described so far become most acute at the point where an archive attempts to reach out to its public. Data that is contained in catalogues is, in this sense, passive - it only comes to the attention of those who seek it out. In other contexts, particularly programming, the archive will be trying its hardest to bring the information to the notice of its public. Programme leaflets must describe the contents of films; posters must list their titles. What is to be done if the film bears a title like Freaks? Should the programme notes remind the audience that the Agatha Christie book on which Ten Little Indians was based was entitled Ten Little Niggers? Would even the circumstances of a season on the history of animation justify a showing of the 1907 film Lightning Sketches, with its offensive "Cohen and Coon" caricatures, or a season on war propaganda the screening of a film such as This Was Japan? Or should an archive reflect the concern of some critics that films such as Black Rain are in any case potentially more invidiously racist?

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### Preliminary conclusions

Responding to these questions, the initial conclusions of the Cataloguing Commission members were as described below:

1. FIAF should support the right of an archive to acquire, hold and preserve those items which it feels are necessary to its collections. An archive should not go out of its way to collect material that is objectionable to significant parts of the community it serves, but neither should it neglect to collect material that is important to or representative of the culture or history of sections of that same community, even if such material is objectionable to other sections.
- 2a. Archives should be sympathetic to the personal concerns of staff, but should not allow those concerns to prevent the proper conduct of archival duties, including those described below.
- 2b. The appropriate duty of cataloguing staff is to record the contents of the collection, not to judge it. Usage of offensive terminology in a film's original title is not a reason for violating the FIAF principle that a film is basically identified by that title. When a film contains obnoxious material, the person preparing the catalogue record should not avoid noting the fact; he or she should, however, take care to explain the origin and nature of the film, to give a context to the material that does not endorse it. With care and experience, a cataloguer can use clearly-labelled quotations from the commentary or inter-titles to convey a film's own attitudes, without giving the impression that the views quoted are those of the archive or the government that funds it. The practice of some archives of allowing a "cataloguer opinion" note has also been found useful in helping preserve this careful stance in the basic catalogue record.
3. In "outreach" activities such as programming, archives should continue to observe the principles described in the preceding paragraphs, but with heightened sensitivity to public reactions. Original titles should be apparent to serious film-students, but need not be emphasised in publicity. Descriptions of content should be accurate, but should also be worded with extreme care, to make clear the distinction between the views of the film maker and those of the archive, etc. If offence is likely to be taken at a given film, the archive should take care to explain why it is still considered appropriate to screen that title, and to provide an adequate historical/cultural context. An attempt may be made to balance the offensive material with film stressing an alternative perspective.

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Further Discussion ?

These are, it is stressed, preliminary conclusions. It may be argued that it is easy for the Cataloguing Commission to reach such conclusions, because cataloguing staff are not those on whom complaints or criticisms are most immediately likely to fall. The Commission is sensitive to this point, and offers its own opinions only to initiate a wider debate on this topic, not to resolve it. Perhaps the topic could provide material for a symposium at a future Congress ? At least the discussion could be continued in future issues of the Bulletin. It will be particularly interesting to hear from colleagues in the Programming and Access Commission, who really are those in the front line on this subject.

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