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CATALOGUING FROM SECONDARY SOURCES

by

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When the National Film and Television Archive was established in 1935 as the National Film Archive, the aim of the Cataloguing Section was to prepare a shotlist (a detailed account of what the cataloguer sees on the screen) for every film that the Archive acquired. Credits were to be taken from the film itself and carefully researched notes added to the catalogue record. Information on the background to the production, the influence of earlier films on the style and content, notes and descriptions of missing scenes and other valuable information was often included.

In addition to such information the shotlist gives something of the feel of the film - its structure, pace and emphasis. It enables the researcher to find relevant titles without making exploratory or speculative viewings. If the required images can be identified confidently and swiftly then the catalogue generates income when extracts are subsequently purchased through the Archive's Production Library.

Cataloguing every acquisition from primary sources (i.e. the film itself) has not been a realistic objective at the NFTVA for many years. The annual rate of acquisition - gratifyingly - rises steadily, and currently stands at approximately 18,000 titles a year. 50 years ago in 1944 the total was 190 titles, ten years ago 5,200, but it has not been possible to increase the number of cataloguers to take account of this substantial rise.

A paper on newsreel cataloguing presented at the FIAF Congress in Mo i Rana, Norway 1993 illustrated that it took experienced cataloguers an average of 4 hours to catalogue and index a 10 minute newsreel. This included shotlisting, the identification of people and events, keying the information and assigning subject headings and classification numbers. This figure clearly indicates the impracticality of cataloguing all acquisitions to this length and depth. Inevitably approximately 80% of the cataloguing records created by the Cataloguing Section are now prepared from secondary sources.

It is reassuring that the FIAF Cataloguing Rules for Film Archives, compiled and edited by Harriet Harrison for the FIAF Cataloguing Commission, recognises and allows for the cataloguer's need to use other sources of documentation. The section 'Research and Chief Source of Information' in the introductory chapter p.xiii states that 'the "chief" source of information is not always the item itself but may also include the

standard and specialised reference works consulted by the cataloguer', and later in Section 0 'Preliminary Notes', 'The principal source for the cataloguing of archival films and videorecordings is therefore the established body of knowledge concerning the originals of those films and recordings, as determined by those involved in their production, and by scholars, researchers and archivists'.

Secondary sources include published filmographies, catalogues of holdings from other film archives, film distributors' catalogues and film and television journals.

One of the problems in taking cataloguing from secondary sources is that errors can be perpetuated for many years as one scholar uses information found in a standard reference source without having had the opportunity to view the film and verify it. As an example of this one could cite TO WHAT RED HELL (1929), Sybil Thorndike's first talking film. Contemporary journals and reviews name her role as Mrs Fairfield, the mother of the epileptic man. This information has been duplicated in such standard works as The Motion Picture Guide and Denis Gifford's The British Film Catalogue 1895-1985. Only having viewed the film, and noted the credits, will it be confirmed that Thorndike played the part of Mrs Nolan, the mother of Jim Nolan who was wrongly condemned to death for the crime.

Feature Film

It has been argued, with some justification, that there is no need to shotlist every feature film acquired as the time taken would be out of all proportion to the use made of the information. The majority of enquiries about full length fiction films come in the direct, simple form "Does the Archive have a copy of Kenneth Branagh's MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING?". Researchers rarely pose detailed questions on location information, cuts in text, order of scenes, costumes, and accounts of the technical arrangements of the shots - all of which may be revealed in a shotlist. When cataloguing feature films, cataloguers rely on acquisitions staff notes (where, however, credits are taken carefully from the screen) and published filmographies such as those provided by Sight and Sound, Monthly Film Bulletin and Motion Picture Yearbook whose information also includes plot summaries.

When cataloguing early fiction films the need to view the material becomes vital. In many cases the print isn't documented elsewhere, the film may come to us untitled or with the wrong title or with scenes in the

wrong order, or be a foreign release version which differs significantly from the original release, and a great deal of research must be undertaken to try to identify the material in hand. Looking for the production company's logo, observing the visual style of the film, the naming of actors and recognition of locations are all obvious clues to identification. It is greatly encouraging that recent scholarship in early cinema has produced some invaluable published filmographies; Henri Bousquet's two volume catalogue of Pathé Frères productions, Aldo Bernardini's three volume work Cinema muto Italiano and Herbert Birett's Das Filmangebot in Deutschland 1895-1911 and its companion volume are all consulted regularly in cataloguing work.

Documentary Film

Documentary film (as distinct from television documentaries) presents different problems when cataloguing from secondary sources. Generally speaking documentaries and non-fiction film have not been documented as systematically or as thoroughly as feature film. Material which does not receive a theatrical release (which constitutes the majority of such titles) emanates from a wide variety of sources - films made by companies to promote their products and processes, the company training or publicity film, community videos, early medical and scientific film, amateur film and home movies, the vast range of educational and instructional films from organisations of all kinds.

Cataloguers rely heavily on any viewing notes supplied by the acquisitions staff, and try to supplement the information by looking in back catalogues of film distributors and journals such as The British National Film & Video Catalogue (which from 1963-1991 documented film and videos released for non-theatric loan or purchase within the UK, with an emphasis on British non-fiction productions). Although in the majority of cases we are able to provide a succinct summary of the item, and assign key production credits, there is no real substitute for viewing the film. The shotlist will provide an account of manufacturing processes shown on the screen, name the participants, describe the buildings, summarise dialogue and note costumes and locations, all of which are an invaluable help to the film researcher and social historian; a value which increases as years pass.

Television Indexing

Cataloguing current television programmes presents its

own problems. Information is taken from the two main weekly listings of British television broadcasts namely Radio Times and TV Times. These are supplemented by press information provided (with varying degrees of comprehensiveness and accuracy) by the television companies themselves.

In recent years the relaxation of a rigorously enforced embargo on the publication of British television schedules by rival 'outside' concerns allowed both magazines to publish details of the entire UK terrestrial, cable and satellite television schedules. This extra coverage, coupled with an increased number of showbiz gossip type articles and advertising, has led to severe pruning of programme information. Twenty or so years ago the cataloguer would have found credits for the costume designer, the music arranger, the graphic artist, the set designer and so on. In most cases now there are few credits given beyond director and producer and often not even they are recorded. An alarming rumour is that advertisers are putting pressure on broadcasters to curtail the credits at the end of a broadcast to gain extra advertising time and revenue. It may eventually be the case that credits disappear from the screen as well. During Independent Television News' (ITN) hourly coverage of the Gulf War this did happen but for different reasons; credits were cut from the screen to allow time for the war reports to be broadcast without undue disruption of the schedules.

Press releases are a very useful supplement to the published tv schedules and the best among them give details of changes in transmission time, alterations of title, guests appearing, issues discussed and so on - information not known, or not available, at the time the weekly listings went to press. This is particularly true of chat shows, daily magazine programmes and current affairs coverage. If the press releases and daily newspapers don't give information on which guests will appear on a particular chat show, or what issues are to be discussed in a live current affairs debate, then there is little the cataloguer can do to provide an informative entry. In such cases colleagues in the TV Acquisitions Section may view the programme and make detailed notes.

If there are spelling errors in the cast or production credits given in the weekly listings or press releases, and the name is not established on the authority files, or known to the cataloguer, then inevitably the error will be replicated. One can only hope that any mistakes will be spotted and corrected at some future date.

There can often be a slight discrepancy between the various sources in the wording of a programme title. A cataloguer may assume that the title given in the press releases (prepared by the production companies) is more likely to be correct, rather than the one cited in the commercial listings. Yet the title given in the weekly listings is the one which researchers are more likely to use - and we do not know which title, if any (as not all programmes carry a title credit), is on the screen. For example some US situation comedies such as THE GOLDEN GIRLS do not carry episode titles on the screen but the weekly magazine listing TV Weekly does cite individual titles. The information is supplied by the production companies who presumably use episode titles as finding aids in their own internal documentation. Researchers therefore will need to be aware of these titles when seeking access to the tapes. Sustaining a balance between the imperative of establishing the 'correct' title of the work formed by the application of cataloguing rules, and the equally strong practical need to trace the work by whatever title the enquirer is likely to quote, is a delicate art. The practical solution is to select one main title and make references from any other titles which may be sought.

Occasionally a series will be billed slightly differently from one week to another. Sports programmes seem to be particularly prone to this so for example we have created three series entries - The BIG FIGHT, The BIG FIGHT - LIVE! and The BIG FIGHT SPECIAL - for what is essentially the same (boxing) programme.

Press releases can provide more detailed information on the programme's content - where the footage was shot, who is being interviewed, the thrust of the reporter's argument. The problem is that the cataloguer is relying on the tone, emphasis and description of the piece provided by a publicist. A cataloguer viewing the same programme would undoubtedly arrive at a more objective account by accurately describing what is seen as well as what is heard.

Subject indexing

Assigning subject terms to films and television programmes you have not viewed is difficult and can often lead to correct but inadequate entries. Using the secondary sources to hand the cataloguer will choose subject terms which express the general content of the item as a whole, not the individual elements within it. For example a television documentary about the London Symphony Orchestra on tour would be indexed simply as 'London Symphony Orchestra' and classified with other

films and television programmes on orchestras subdivided by country and town. This entry would be accurate and those looking specifically for the LSO, or orchestras generally, would find it without undue difficulty. If, however, the cataloguer viewed the programme and provided a shotlist a great deal more information would emerge. More subject terms would be assigned providing access under a far wider range of topics. The cataloguer would index the names of the soloists, the pieces they were playing, the concert halls where the orchestra performed, whether they were interior or exterior shots, the fact that the orchestra's manager spoke at length about administration and management, the fact that one scene was filmed in a famous restaurant (of interest for the decoration of that particular building), that there is a good establishing shot of Rome and so on. The entry under concert halls for example would be made available to the programme maker who had no interest in the LSO but was concerned with architecture and the work of the architect who had designed that building. An entry under 'Arts administration' would provide a useful access point for the arts management student. In this case the cataloguer would index what was heard as well as what is seen. The ability to describe objectively what is seen, while divorcing it from what is heard, and summarise the narrative succinctly and impartially requires considerable skill on the part of the cataloguer. This skill cannot be developed, replicated or imitated by scanning secondary sources.

Conclusion

Cataloguing from secondary sources will remain with us in the foreseeable future. It demands of the cataloguer a different set of skills; the ability to turn to the right reference work quickly, to know which sources you can trust and which should be treated with caution. It is no longer feasible to shotlist every acquisition but it is possible to identify parts of the collection which merit detailed cataloguing. As an example, the National Film and Television Archive is currently concentrating on its pre-1920 holdings with the aim of identifying and shotlisting them in their entirety. By making this information, and the works themselves, widely accessible we will provide present and future film historians with a unique and lasting resource and add significantly to the work being done by archives throughout the world in preparation for the centenary of cinema.

REFERENCES

1. The FIAF Cataloguing Rules for Film Archives

compiled and edited by Harriet W. Harrison for the FIAF Cataloguing Commission. K.G. Saur, 1991.

2. Newsreel Cataloguing at the National Film and Television Archive by Olwen Terris and the NFTVA Cataloguing Section. Unpublished paper presented at the FIAF Newsreel Symposium, Mo i Rana, 1993.

3. The British National Film & Video Catalogue ceased as an annual publication in 1991. Since then its editorial staff have been situated in the Cataloguing Section of the National Film and Television Archive. The collection and cataloguing of information on new films and videos continues and telephone and written enquiries are welcomed. It is hoped to resume publication in 1994.

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