

FIAF Cataloging Commission Occasional Paper

No. 6

"ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE, [CATALOG] THE NEGATIVE"

by

Liora Silberstein  
Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive  
of the  
Hebrew University of Jerusalem  
Central Zionist Archives  
Jerusalem, Israel

July 1994

## CATALOGING AND CLASSIFICATION OF NEGATIVES AND OUTTAKES

It all began when I arrived bright-eyed and inexperienced for my first librarian's job at the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive. The only thing I could safely claim knowledge of was the "Jewish" part of our name, "Film" (that's what you watch at the movies, isn't it?) and "Archive" (I studied library science!) were to me unknown quantities. After a few months cataloging experience at the Archive, I was presented with my next project: the cataloging and classification of the negatives, outtakes and pre-production material in the Archive. I felt as if I had been thrust into a lion's den, a place to which the vault of our archive bears remarkable similarity.

My approach to the project was determined by the way our classification and cataloging system had developed. The classification system at the Archive is an inhouse system which was devised in the early 1970's, and was maintained by various personnel - professional and non-professional. In short, all viewing prints of films are assigned an arbitrary letter and a five digit number, eg. M00308 determined by the available shelf space marked by the particular letter. The number of viewing prints is reflected after the classification number with digits, eg. M00308 1,2 which means that we hold two viewing prints of the film. If a film consists of more than one reel, it is designated after the classification number with letters, eg. M00308 A,B which means that the film consists of two reels.

Chaos set in over the years because classification numbers had been assigned according to the type and gauge of the film, for example, 35 mm and 16 mm positive prints of the same film were given different classification numbers, while the negative was assigned a double letter and number which bore no relationship to either positive print. For example, a 16 mm print of a film in our collection called First Steps was assigned the classification number M00308, its 35 mm print was assigned P00567, its negative and outtakes material (at that stage uncataloged) was assigned SS00023. Most of the outtakes and pre-production material were classified with the negatives, although part of the outtakes had been assigned a triple letter and number corresponding to the positive print. The senior librarian at the Archive, Wendy Luterman, had tackled on her arrival four years before me, the integration of 35 mm and 16 mm prints of the same film, under the same classification number. When I arrived, the negatives and outtakes and pre-production material had been partially reclassified under variations of the same classification number, eg. M00308 indicates viewing print, MM00308 indicates negative, MMM00308 indicates outtakes or pre-production material (classified together). (For the purposes of this article, I will use the term "outtakes" to refer to both the outtakes and pre-production material).

Prints cataloged as negatives and outtakes had been checked to see whether the particular prints were negative or positive, but had not been examined further. The classification into the three categories was determined according to the information written on each can. In many cases (as I soon found out), the information was either inaccurate, or the film had actually been placed in the wrong can. It was possible, therefore, that what had been classified as negative could actually be outtakes, and vice versa.

Additional positive prints of films were assigned a two letter, five digit classification number corresponding to the viewing print and put in the vault as preservation prints. I came across examples of negatives and additional positive prints which had been assigned the same number, but were not prints of the same film. This was due to the problem of our initial classification system stated previously.

The cataloging system in our Archive is fully computerised on the on-line national university network called Aleph. From the establishment of the Archive, a decision was taken to catalog all entries in English, in order to make searching easier for foreign researchers. Each record is built around the viewing print, with two additional fields, one containing the cataloging of the negative prints of that film and one for the cataloging of the outtakes of that film. When I arrived, neither the negatives nor the outtakes had been cataloged but an entry had been made in each field if we held negatives and outtakes for that film. One couldn't tell from the cataloging how many cans we held of that particular film, for example First Steps:

NEG: MM00308 (field for negatives)

OUTS: MMM00308 (field for outtakes)

Our goals were to:

- 1) define the parameters of the categories of negatives and outtakes, as well as a system of priorities, in order to determine what would be classified as a Preservation Master.
- 2) establish Preservation Master prints (both negative and positive) which would be distinguished from the other less complete negative prints and additional positive prints kept in the vault, by both their classification and cataloging.
- 3) technically examine each can of negatives and outtakes and enter full cataloging in the separate fields relating to negatives and outtakes, in our computer catalog.
- 4) standardize the details of these fields.
- 5) reclassify the remaining negative prints and outtakes that had not yet been reclassified under variations of the same classification number.

Below is a schematic description of how we organized the preservation prints, negatives, outtakes and pre-production material:

### Classification and Cataloging of Preservation Prints

We defined a Preservation Master (abbreviated as PM in our database) as the most complete and best quality print of a film to be stored in optimal preservation conditions available on the Archive premises. The best case scenario would be a film which has two viewing prints in addition to a positive and a negative print which would be kept as preservation prints (both having good quality visuals, 35 mm, sound). A 16 mm print can be a PM if there is no 35 mm print, or if the 16 mm is in better condition.

PM's are assigned a 2 letter, 5 digit classification number, which corresponds to the viewing print, for example, viewing print is indicated by M00308, PM is indicated by MM00308. The word (PNEG) is written on the can of a negative PM next to the number and (PPOS) is written on the can of a positive PM, in order to identify easily the different versions. (The letter "P" stands for Preservation)

Where there is no negative print and several positive prints, the best quality positive print becomes the PM and the others become the viewing prints. If there is only one positive print, it becomes the only PM. The record is built around this PM print and the classification number reflects the fact that this is a unique positive PM by the addition of [PU] after the number, eg. AA00456 [PU]. [PU] is also added after the number on the can itself. In the event that a negative print is received (or found) of a PU then that PU becomes an available viewing print with a one letter classification number and the negative becomes the PM.

The following cases are relevant when these are the only prints that can be considered as PM's:

- 1) Silent visuals with separate optical or magnetic sound track of the same gauge, must be cataloged together as a PM. Previously, separate sound track had been classified separately as outtakes.
- 2) If the visuals don't include beginning or end titles but there are titles on a separate reel, they should be cataloged together. If the visuals lack titles, it can still be considered a PM.
- 3) If the negative PM lacks visuals, then a positive print (even if it is the sole positive print) should also be stored in preservation.
- 4) If there is a positive PM with sound track and a silent negative without separate sound track, then both prints are stored as PM's.
- 5) Where there is no negative and several incomplete positive prints, then all positive prints become PM's.

Preservation prints were cataloged in the computer in a specially created field called PRM. The following example is of First Steps, a film with two viewing prints (reflected in the classification number) and two PM's:

PM: MM00308 A,B,C (PPOS; 3 reels; HEB; 35 mm; b&w; sound)

PM: MM00308 A,B (PNEG; 2 reels; 16 mm; b&w; silent with separate sound; separate credits)

(A,B,C indicates three consecutive reels, HEB indicates Hebrew)

All details are standardized in the above order and form. Unless otherwise noted in this field, the print is complete. Unless otherwise stated, sound is optical.

### Classification and Cataloging of Negatives and Positives which do not qualify as PM's but are not classified as Outtakes

We classified a negative in this category, if it is incomplete and/or of poor quality, including workprints and footage which is under or over-developed. According to the librarian's discretion, if the Archive holds a good negative PM, then a negative workprint could be classified under outtakes.

A maximum of two positive prints are classified as PM's. Additional positive prints which are in worse condition than the positive PM print/s are classified here.

These negative and positive prints are also given two letter prefixes in their call number but (neg) or (pos) is written on the can, (instead of PPOS or PNEG) in order to distinguish them from preservation negative and positive prints.

These prints are cataloged in a field called PTN. The following example is taken from First Steps:

MM00308 A (pos; 1 reel; 35 mm; b&w; sound)  
MM00308 B (neg; 1 reel; 35 mm; b&w; silent)

These prints have been cataloged here because they are both incomplete and there are sufficient preservation prints. The order and descriptions in the above parentheses have been standardized.

### Classification and Cataloging of Outtakes and Pre-production material

The following types of material are always classified as outtakes no matter what other prints are held:

- 1) Negative or positive material not spliced, but wound together in one reel,
- 2) A can containing several bobbins with insignificant amounts of negative film,
- 3) A&B rolls,
- 4) Additional copies of sound track, (other than separate sound track classified with the PM)
- 5) Additional copies of beginning or end credits (other than separate credits classified with the PM)

Outtakes and pre-production material of an existing positive film are assigned a triple letter classification number corresponding to the viewing print, eg. positive is indicated by M00308; outtakes is indicated by MMM00308.

These types of materials are cataloged in their own field called PTC; the entries are now more detailed and standardized. The following example is taken from First Steps:

MMM00308 A,B (separate sound; 2 reels; HEB; 35 mm)  
MMM00308 (outtakes; pos; 35 mm; b&w; silent)

### Cataloging and Classification of Negatives, Outtakes and Pre-production material where there is no positive print held

I discovered that some negative prints had been incorrectly classified and cataloged due to the fact that most of the negatives and outtakes had not been physically checked, but rather cataloged according to (what turned out to be incorrect) information written on the can. Since these prints were negative, and in most cases lacked beginning and end credits, it was difficult to determine their titles. The visuals were examined and extensive keyword searching was done in order to try and match the prints to existing positive prints. Regarding films for which positive prints were not found, we had to come up with a temporary solution for classifying and cataloging them until they could be viewed.

The letter Z was chosen as a prefix for these films because no viewing prints are classified using this letter. The material was assigned into the negatives and outtakes categories based on the rules and priorities we had developed. Negatives were assigned ZZ plus five digits, and outtakes (if the only existing print) were assigned ZZZ plus five digits. If outtakes were found of existing negatives (ZZ's), they were assigned the same number as the negative, eg. ZZ00024 indicates negative, ZZZ00024 indicates outtakes.

## Conclusion

The most important point we kept in mind throughout the project was that each print had to be judged on its own merit in terms of the overall hierarchy we had devised. For example, if all that existed of a film was a very incomplete positive print in fair condition, then that became the PM. On the other hand, if there already existed two complete positive prints and a negative print of the film in excellent condition, then that same positive was relegated to the field for additional positive and negative prints. As the project went on, we kept discovering types of prints that we hadn't encountered before and had to incorporate these new realities to our already bulging list of rules. Our rules were tailored to classify and catalog our collection as efficiently as possible but we realised that they could not take into account all possibilities and combinations that would arise. An important lesson I learned was that there are no hard and fast rules, rather as each new circumstance arose, it had to be debated and many an afternoon would find the librarians engaged in heated discussion as to how to catalog and classify the offending print. Frequently we had to re-evaluate previous decisions in the light of new information we had learned.

This project, which was originally so daunting, proved to be very challenging. I felt like I had been given a unique opportunity, working for a relatively small archive, both to help pioneer what is undoubtedly one of the most difficult aspects of film classification and cataloging and to be able to complete it. I felt a real sense of accomplishment when after two years of tedious cataloging and classification, I realised how many valuable negative prints had been rescued from a life of obscurity.

The project is almost complete, although I've learned that in archives, the word "complete" is best left out of one's vocabulary. An archivist's work (if I may now call myself that) is never complete and sure enough, as I write, my next project is underway, to compare our viewing prints and positive preservation prints, to ensure that those being preserved are the best quality positives that we hold.

The following example is a print-out of the first screen of the film First Steps, used throughout the article:

CN	M00308 1,2
TL	TZE'ADIM RISHONIM
TT	FIRST STEPS
PL	Israel
YR	1953
FY	1953
LN	HEB
MT	F
NN	M00308 (1): HEB
PPZ	Geva Film Studios (Tel-Aviv)==Production company
PPZ	Jewish Agency==Sponsor
PPZ	Keren Hayesod==Sponsor
PPZ	Keren Kayemeth Leyisrael==Sponsor
PPZ	Schweig, Shmuel J==Producer
PSS	Schweig, Shmuel J==Director
PSS	Kariv, Joseph==Screenplay
PSS	Steinhardt, Alfred==Camera
PSS	Kalman, A==Camera
PSS	Simone, D==Editor
PSS	Frumer, Ziporah==Editor
PSS	Andre, Charles==Narrator
PSS	Craig, Edward==Music
PSS	Halpern, Eddy==Music
PSS	American Film Producers==Foreign version
PTI	sound
PTI	b&w
PTI	27 min
PTF	pos
PTF	16 mm
PTF	1 reel
PTF	978 feet
PRM	PM: MM00308 A,B,C (PPOS; 3 reels; HEB; 35 mm; b&w; sound)
PRM	PM: MM00308 A,B (PNEG; 2 reels; 16 mm; b&w; silent with separate sound; separate credits)
PTN	MM00308 A (pos; 1 reel; 35 mm; b&w; sound)
PTN	MM00308 B (neg; 1 reel; 35 mm; b&w; silent)
PTC	MMM00308 A,B (separate sound; 2 reels; HEB; 35 mm)
PTC	MMM00308 (outtakes; pos; 35 mm; b&w; silent)
AB	A summary of five years of independence in Israel
TC	0 Credits
TC	24 GV's Countryside
TC	84 Funeral procession and mourners at graveside
TC	112 CU Sculpture and declaration of independence
TC	122 Immigrants arriving by ship and plane