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"WHERE'S THE REST OF ME?"

THE PROBLEM OF COMPLETENESS IN THE FILM CATALOGUE

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**"WHERE'S THE REST OF ME ?": THE PROBLEM OF 'COMPLETENESS' IN
THE FILM CATALOGUE**

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It is an inevitable result both of the nature of film as a medium and of the way in which an archive's collection of film grows that every film archive in the world holds material that they know to be incomplete. This incompleteness can be the result of many causes: the following list covers only a few of the more obvious ones.

- A film may have been deliberately cut by official censorship at some point in its history.
- Distributors or producers may have sought to second-guess the official censor or to avoid a possible public outcry by making their own cuts in a film before releasing it to a new audience.
- The film may be shortened or altered on release (or re-release) to respond to the comments of critics or preview audiences.
- The film may be shortened to suit the convenience of cinema programming; in many countries, the pressure of advertising breaks makes such mutilation still more common in films broadcast on commercial television.
- The film may be incomplete through accidental loss or damage or - in the case of older film - because of physical deterioration in the film stock.
- Material from a private collector may have suffered a kind of "non-accidental" damage: he or she may have removed parts of a film (this is particularly likely where titles and credits are concerned) to conceal its identity when its acquisition by that collector had not been, perhaps, entirely legal.
- Film taken over from commercial libraries may reflect another kind of incompleteness: pieces may have been cut from original films for re-sale or re-use in other compilations, or to keep a film "topical".
- The picture component of a film may be incomplete if it has been doctored for presentation in a format other than its original one - examples include silent film transferred on sound machinery; academy frame pictures trimmed top and bottom to give a wide-screen effect; wide-screen pictures trimmed at the sides (or "pan and scan" transferred) to fit a different ratio such as that of the domestic television screen, and so on.

- The archive itself may have contributed to a film's incompleteness: many archives have at some point followed selection policies including (for example) preserving the image but not the commentary for newsreels, etc.

It must be noted that there is also a reverse problem. Films exist - and indeed archives play their part in this process - that might be called more complete than the original version. "Director's Cuts", "De Luxe Editions", "Export Versions" and archive restorations are all among the phenomena that result in versions of films longer than those originally released. For the sake of convenience, this paper will continue to talk primarily about "incompleteness", but many of the points raised would apply with equal force to the opposite problem, for which perhaps an agreed term needs to be coined.

The question of incompleteness raises a number of questions for the archival cataloguer. At a simple level, he or she will be aware that the fact that the print viewed for cataloguing purposes was incomplete does not automatically mean that the archive's best or preservation copy of that film shares the same status. The cataloguer will explore the relationship of the screened print to all other material: it is when the best or preservation copy of the film is itself not complete that these issues become important. At that level, we may begin to ask ourselves the following kind of questions. To what extent should the catalogue reflect the incompleteness of a film? How easy is it to gauge "completeness" anyway? And how can completeness or its opposite be most usefully described? This paper explores some of these topics, but does not offer definitive answers.

It has long been the position of FIAF and its Cataloguing Commission that, to reflect the international nature of the film medium, the primary identification of a film for cataloguing purposes - in no matter which country the film is being catalogued - should be the original title of that film in its country of origin. This principle has meant that the cataloguing of film in film archives has always involved a mixture of a description of the film that was originally made with a description of the copy or copies of the film actually held in the archive.

Leaving out of consideration in this paper the more complex issues involved in the FIAF position (what is an original title? what is the country of origin of an international production? and so on), the principle itself here seems to be the important thing. Once the position has been established that the film held is named by reference to the film as it was originally released, it would seem logical to say that the cataloguer should also describe for the reader of the catalogue the extent to which the film held conforms to or differs from the film as it was originally released. The possibility of the film being shorter than that original version is clearly an important aspect of that description.

Like many statements of principle, this one is easily said but considerably more difficult to put into practice. Certain kinds of incompleteness are simple to reflect in the cataloguing process. If the archive is missing one or more reels of a multi-reel film, or if the soundtrack is not held, or if the whole title and credit sequence has been excised from the copy held, the omission is easy to spot and easy to describe. On the other hand, a minor cut consequent on physical damage or deterioration may be equally easy to spot, but raises the question of whether such damage needs to be described - at least in the context of a catalogue description as distinct from the archive's technical records: might it not be assumed that an archive film user (while hoping to find a film in the best possible condition) will accept minor incidental damage in the same way as the user of a book library will tolerate discoloured paper or a broken binding of a rare old publication ?

Other kinds of incompleteness present the cataloguer with an entirely different range of problems. If a film - particularly an imported film - has been skilfully cut to meet standards of morality, taste or political correctness different from those prevailing when and where it was made (whether those be formally stipulated by a censorship authority or simply anticipated by a distribution or broadcasting agency), it can be extremely difficult for a cataloguer to describe those cuts with precision. The cataloguer may not even be certain that such cuts have been made; alternatively, there may be a general awareness of cuts, but - obviously enough, in the circumstances - great difficulty in providing an accurate description of them.

A further layer of complexity is the kind of "fuzzy censorship" that blurs an issue without cutting it: a recently-published book¹ points out not only that the British version of *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* suffered eleven actual cuts in its opening sequence but also that a rather more decorous "Blimey !" was substituted for Will Scarlett's original expletive at the point where Robin has himself catapulted over the castle walls. Such cleaning-up of language is common practice in Britain, especially in films shown on television, where it is often quite laughable, but it is not the only kind of cut-free censorship that has been practised. Others described in the same book include requests for the reprinting of certain scenes to make the precise nature of the action more difficult to follow, or the body parts on display less visible, and so on. A purist might say that these changes are a form of incompleteness, but their identification and description would be a hard task for the innocent cataloguer.

The above considerations formed the background to the circulation of a questionnaire in 1992 (I apologise to those who responded to that questionnaire for my failure to report

1 Tom Dewe Mathews: *Censored* (Chatto and Windus, London, 1994), p 259.

on it earlier). The questionnaire asked FIAF affiliates whether their film catalogue described the completeness of a film (or copy of a film); whether they had a written rule controlling the procedure to be used for such description; how completeness was indicated; and what was the standard against which completeness was judged. Apart from the first two, the questions did not require that only one answer could apply - in other words, archives could indicate that they used more than one descriptive method, or more than one gauge of completeness. The results may be summarised as follows:

- 37 archives replied, of which 34 stated that they did describe the completeness of a film when they catalogued it.
- Of the 34 archives which did describe completeness, there was an almost exactly even split on the question of whether or not the archive had a written rule explaining how to describe completeness: 16 archives had a rule, 18 did not.
- Of methods used to describe completeness, 28 archives reported that they used, in the questionnaire's words, 'a kind of fraction ("3 reels out of 4)": that is, they addressed the form of incompleteness, missing reels, which is both the most obvious and the easiest to describe. Only 2 archives indicated that they reported a percentage of completeness. 22 respondents stated that they described completeness in a textual note.
- In terms of the standard used to judge completeness, the most commonly used (indicated by 22 archives) was that of comparison with the most complete copy held by the archive itself. 19 archives indicated adherence to the FIAF principle of comparison to the original release in the country of origin, while 18 referred (or referred also) to the original release in the country of the archive. Only 7 indicated the attempt to take into account the intentions of the director ("if known to be different from the original release").

Respondents were asked to comment on the subject if they wished: many took up the invitation, and raised the issues mentioned in the preamble to this paper. Several pointed out the difficulty of establishing an appropriate standard for "completeness", and almost as many pointed out that variant versions could be longer as well as shorter than the "original".

Another point raised by more than one respondent was the difference between an accidentally incomplete copy of a film, a copy deliberately shortened, an intentional extract of a film (for example, one prepared for study purposes), an accidental extract or fragment (such as an isolated reel of a longer film), and a self-contained segment of a film (such as a single story from a newsreel issue). The need to cover trims, out-takes, rushes, trailers, screen-tests and other forms of "extra" material possibly relating to an identified film (whether complete or not - indeed, whether the completed

film was held in the archive or not) was also raised by several people. One recommendation which the reading of these comments readily suggests is the desirability of formulating an agreed terminology for this range of material: I was myself occasionally uncertain as to the differences or similarities between different kinds of "associated" material referred to by different respondents.

I hope it will not be considered an unjust conclusion to say that the responses to this questionnaire indicate that FIAF archives are aware of the desirability of describing completeness, but that apart from the relatively easy question of gross incompleteness (missing reels) few of them have evolved a methodology for doing so. As a result, it may be questioned whether we are always providing the users of our catalogues with the best possible level of information. A policy of openness about the state of the material we hold, even when it is less than perfect, will in the long run help the community of archivists and researchers ensure that our knowledge of film history is as well-developed as it can be. Beyond that, our ability to preserve and restore the films that make up that history will also benefit from the fullest possible knowledge about the completeness of the material that survives.

The following observations are offered as a first step in discussing whether or how these improvements might be sought.

- FIAF archives cataloguing their own national production or assisting in the production of national filmographies have a particular responsibility to research and publish precise information on the length of the "original" version, which may then be used by other FIAF archives to explore the completeness of copies of that film held elsewhere. If there is a possibility of ambiguity, it should also be clear which version they have chosen to regard as the "original".
- The same archives should also record details of other versions which, in their opinion, should be recognised as legitimate alternatives that are nonetheless not the "original" version - the syndrome of "Director's cuts" or "export versions" might be addressed in this way - carefully noting the lengths of such recognised versions and the differences between them and the original.
- In the same way, FIAF archives cataloguing a film which constitutes the official version for their country of a film from another source (whether its length and content are determined by the censorship authority or by the distributor) should research and make clear any differences between this and the "original" version, supplying as much detail as possible.
- The cascade of information that will result from such efforts will help other archives - not to mention film

restorers and scholars - to evaluate the nature of "complete" and "incomplete" copies wherever they are held, and to explore and explain the nature and background to those that are incomplete.

- FIAF archives should try to formulate a terminology that would help to define the nature and extent of incompleteness in a film. Each archive could develop its own, but obviously an agreed standard would be preferable. Perhaps this is a future project for the Cataloguing Commission? Parameters for such a terminology could include:
 - an indication of whether the incompleteness is deliberate or the result of accident (loss or damage); if the result of deliberate action, then it should indicate the reason (censorship, re-release, extracting etc);
 - an indication of whether the incompleteness is such as seriously to impair a viewer's intellectual and/or aesthetic appreciation of the film (on the analogy used earlier, a library book remains readable with certain kinds of damage, but not with others); topics for consideration in this area should include incorrect presentation formats etc;
 - a methodology for handling films that are "more complete" than the original to which they are referred;
 - an agreed terminology for material associated with a given film (eg rushes, trims, out-takes, screen-tests etc).
- The catalogue description for a film which is known or suspected to be incomplete should clearly indicate the extent of the archive's knowledge or suspicions of any cuts in a prominent part of the catalogue record.
- Any indication of incompleteness given in a catalogue entry should indicate the basis for comparison. Only in the case of extreme incompleteness (ie missing reels) is such a statement likely to be self-explanatory.
- It is of course assumed that any work along these lines will be undertaken within the framework of recommendations already included in *The FIAF Cataloguing Rules for Film Archives* (Saur 1991). The Rules cover the basic topic of completeness under point 5.3.2 of chapter 5 (Physical description). Suggestions for notes on (in)completeness are included under point 7.2.10.3 of chapter 7 (Notes). Point 1.4.3 (Additions to titles) of chapter 1 (Title and statement of responsibility area) includes some suggested additions to titles to indicate certain kinds of incomplete copies and associated materials.

It will be held, with some justification, that the suggestions just made represent an unrealistic ideal, as much of the information will be difficult to research and provide. This is accepted, but there is no harm in stating an optimum policy,

even if one must acknowledge the practical difficulties of living up to it. To revert to the opening remarks of this paper, film is a uniquely international medium within which it is nonetheless likely for a single film to be represented, in the archives of the world, in a very large number of local variations. It is at least part of the role of the cataloguer to make it easier for his fellow archivists and others in the film world to explore and understand the range of those variations.