

NOTES ON FILM CATALOGUING

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The writer of this article has been a member of the Film Cataloguing Commission of FIAF since 1969.

While working on the manual entitled 'Film Cataloguing', published in 1979, the collaborators were curious, whether researchers and customers thumbing the catalogues of film archives, and the staff at newly established film archives are aware of the amount of the painstaking detection work needed to identify each film in order to have it filed in a collection's recording system with all the necessary data and characteristics.

When we set out to make a catalogue of a film, our purpose always is to provide researchers and customers with a thorough and multileveled description concerning the examined film's data. Still, we found it tempting to offer the reader a brief account of the cataloguing process by comparing the various methods and making it possible for them to estimate the amount of time spent on a film's data processing as it is done in archives. When I was commissioned to complete this task, I thought it was going to be a ~~an~~ easy job. I have been working in this field for 21 years and I have seen a lot of archives in many countries. All I have to do, I thought, is to write down my experiences. But I soon realized that the subject was very complex, since all archives have different methods, from traditional hand-written cards to computerized data processing. (Harriet W. Harrison writes in her material on cataloguing work using computer systems at the Film Department of the Library of Congress that the complete cataloguing of one film may very well take as long as 8-10 hours).

Since I could not hope to deal with all methods, it appeared reasonable enough for me to describe the system applied by our cataloguing team at the Hungarian Film Archives, and deal with some of the problems that emerge in our line of work. I considered I should be content with the Filmographical Group's task at our Institute, beginning with the entry card of the newly listed film being transferred to us. The Technical Group's part in the cataloguing process, which includes technical checking, stock-listing and entering the film in an inventory, must be disregarded in this article.

At the Hungarian Film Archives the basic conception of the film cataloguing process from registration to index supply is to classify films according to three genres; namely feature films (including short feature and animated films), non-fiction films and news reels. We have a fourth group referred to as off-cuts, which are classified according to special aspects, independent of genre.

Apart from a small useful index-card duplicating machine called "Minigraph", our group has no specialized equipment of any kind, so we do our work in a very traditional way. Special care and attention is devoted to the Hungarian films within each genre, and I expect it should be the same with all archives concerning the films of their own nations. Before dealing with the genres and the essential data groups, let me remark that the registration of the technical data follows the same method in case of each genre, and is done by a colleague from the technical group and one from the filmographical group. The technical data are as follows: the number of reels, length/duration, gauge, width, data of language/credit, dialogue, inserts and subtitles. The registration of these data is indispensable for viewing a film, and we can record the data authentically only from the film itself.

1. FEATURE FILMS (short feature films and animated films)

1.1 data referring to the film makers

The process of these data has two stages. The credit is taken down by a cataloguer from the film itself. The data of the credit copied from

the reel and completed from the list provided by the studio staff is taken down on the "readers leaf" and on the main cards.

It is a rather unfortunate recent tendency that the film maker's names are listed in the main title/credit without their function in the film, thus giving cataloguers a great deal of extra investigation to identify the names of the staff with their contribution, and the actors' names with their part in the film. If a film is dubbed, the registration of the complete credit always includes the names of the dubbing staff and dubbing actors.

1.1.1 Some of the data of the credits(main titles) that are as complete as possible are selected for index cards containing abridged main titles. These data are: the title of the film (distribution title, original title, other titles), country and year of production, production company, director (in the case of animated films also animator), author, screenplay writer, director of photography, composer and 4 or 5 leading actors in the film. On the main card and on the readers leaf we try to take down complete credits for foreign films as well; otherwise, besides the most essential data, we indicate at least the name of art director, editor and sound engineer. If these names are not available, we must be satisfied with an abridged description that we use on the index cards.

1.2 contents

Hungarian films are dealt with after viewing in each case. To write down the contents of a Hungarian feature film, depending on the nature of the plot, together with the data processing, can take 2-5 hours. Two descriptions are made: a detailed account approximately one page, and a short summary of 2-3 lines. The longer description can be used for Hungarian filmographies, the shorter one may come in handy for various information purposes.

Foreign films are dealt with in a somewhat simpler way; if a description by the distribution company is available, we make only a short summary of the story, in order to shorten the cataloguing procedure. It may occur that we make this summary without actually seeing the film, but theoretically we must insist on seeing each film, as we consider it essential for a cataloguer to be knowledgeable about the film he/she is dealing with. Since the short feature films and animated films also belong to fiction, the accounts of the contents are consequently given according to the system described earlier.

1.3 classification according to subject matter

We apply this method instead of the controversial classification according to genre, and in our judgement it has proved to be a very practical method. For the hierarchical arrangement, a very simple chart that is approached only from a practical aspect, we borrowed some of the main categories used by the UDC. Though it sometimes occurs that subject matter and genre overlap, e.g. comedy, crime-story, this does not reduce its applicability. If FIAF establishes a standard system of classification of genres, we will, of course, rewrite this part of our record system.

2. NON-FICTION FILMS

2.1 data referring to the film makers

The method of recording data for this group of films is very similar to that of the feature films. The only difference practically is that certain data become more important, e.g. data of advisors, while

other data, e.g. cast, do not exist here. On account of the nature of this genre, the data group is much smaller.

2.2 contents

When we deal with non-fiction films, we only make one short summary. Depending on the subject matter some films are given a more detailed description than others. Films which deal with one subject matter, for example a documentary film on some social symptom, or a popular scientific film on horse breeding, do not require more indexing than 3-5 special references for the classified index cards. The complete cataloguing process takes an average 1-3 hours. However, films which involve a great deal of events, show a number of scenes, or include important people in them, require more detailed treatment, e.g. some of the films about the events of World War II, have as many as 100-150 index cards. This phase of the labour process has a great deal in common with our third group of genres; the duration of the cataloguing process is also the same as in the case of the news reels.

3. NEWS REELS

3.1 data referring to the film makers

News reels dealing with one subject matter, special editions, and magazines are handled in the same way as non-fiction films. Since the regular weekly news reels "make a catalogue" of themselves, we do not make main cards about them. The names of the film makers are written following each event of a news reel.

3.2 contents

The accounts of the news reels contents dealing with one subject matter, and those of special editions, are given in a way similar to the accounts of non-fiction films: a brief summary and 3-5 special references for classified index cards are given.

However, news reels issued regularly and featuring various events require very careful and detailed data processing. The data of one weekly edition is worked up on an average of 20-30 classified index cards. Detailed data processing on these very important documents of the history of an age is an essential part of our information service. A complete description of a single news reel can take as long as 3-5 hours.

Some notes on classified index cards: at the early period of our cataloguing activity we used alphabetical subject catalogues, but this system soon turned out to be disadvantageously subjective and inefficient. The application of UDC also seemed to be inadequate in the film cataloguing area. Eventually we developed the system of our present subject index by combining UDC and the sectorial structuring of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office. In the recent past, a team examined and discussed the necessary amendments which, however, did not affect the main groups and the system as a whole; only some ideas and details were brought up-to-date.

4. OFF-CUTS

The fourth group, i.e. the so-called "off-cuts" have remained an unsolved problem with our archives, and I am not knowledgeable about systems for handling the off-cuts at other archives.

We inherited this part of our collection from the very early history of archives, and occasionally we still come into the possession of

off-cuts which are extremely difficult to identify, so we put them aside for a while. Certainly, every collection should give place to fragments which are of greater or smaller importance, but I am convinced that we must not resign ourselves to leaving them unidentified. We do our best to clear up the mystery of this part of our collection and build them into our cataloguing system.

In fact, I consider it important to examine the time devoted to the cataloguing process of this group of films because it is one of the most labour-demanding areas of our work. I find it a most attractive and challenging task to track down or detect the fragments' origins and locate their position in the film.

Once I viewed a reel of about 300 metres which apparently contained parts of several news reels. I took down the data passages which I considered important for further research, and continued my investigation among the descriptions of the news reels. Then I viewed every likely news reel which could have had anything to do with the available data whether they contained the events of the off-cuts or not.

If one of the news reels did not contain the events of the off-cuts which it was supposed to, according to the description, the off-cut was inserted in its original place. If the film did contain the off-cut part, we could dispose of the fragment. I intended to make it apparent by this example that the exploration work for an off-cut may occasionally require several days' duration.

I am fully convinced that a well-arranged and accessible collection should have the least possible number of unidentified parts. Let me remark that the final exploration of the off-cuts is included in our archive's current year task.

In this article I have been trying to describe the objective aspects of cataloguing work. Finally I would like to refer to some of the subjective aspects of our job.

The cataloguing work requires a good deal of meticulousness and precision. A cataloguer should certainly possess these qualities, but, of course, they can be learned to a certain extent. The subjective factor characteristically manifests itself with recording the contents of a film. In my judgement a good cataloguer's description of the contents of a film should adequately describe both the facts of the film and the message the filmmakers intended to express.

Finally, I would like to mention that it is advisable to divide the cataloguing activity among the staff members, if possible, so that every one has his/her own special field. If a staff member acquires a good command of a certain area of the cataloguing work, such as dealing with films of a certain country or language area, or being specialized in genre aspects of films, he/she can promote the efficiency of this attractive and useful activity.

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