

The Orphan Film Community

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Monica Nolan

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San Jose State University

Abstract

The orphan film community is a recently formed community of film lovers focused specifically on orphan films, that is, films abandoned by their copyright owner. Examples include home movies, industrials, newsreels, and outtakes, among others. Through an examination of literature on this community as well as on the behaviors of hobbyist collectors, archive users and archivists, this paper will describe the community's behaviors and information needs and address some of the challenges and controversies specific to orphan film. Finally, the paper will suggest opportunities libraries have to collaborate with and serve this community.

Introduction

Seventy-five percent of silent-era American films are believed lost, according to a Library of Congress Study (Ohlheiser, 2013). This gaping hole in the world's film heritage is common knowledge among film buffs, but few people know that in many cases the destruction was deliberate. In the 1920s and 30s studios destroyed their own film prints due to fire danger, the cost of storage space, and the desire to have no earlier versions to compete with a remake, among other reasons (Pierce, 1997). Many surviving films owe their survival to private collectors (Pierce, 1997).

This context helps explain the behavior and characteristics of the orphan film community, archivists, scholars, students, hobbyist collectors, and filmmakers, who value films that have been abandoned by their copyright owners and caretakers. Examples of this media include home movies, industrial films, educational films, newsreels, and commercials. The definition has expanded to include videotape and digital formats, and Streible, founder of the biannual Orphan Film Symposium, writes "most films and media produced throughout history now fall into at least one orphan category." (2007, p. 128). These are films that for the most part are without commercial value, and this context of implied opposition to the mainstream film world (Vernet, 2007) has lent the community of orphan film lovers an outsider quality. Professionals and hobbyists alike are characterized by the passion Lee & Trace identified as a characteristic of hobbyist collectors (2009). To save orphan films, artists have rescued them from dumpsters, collectors have made illegal copies, and archivists have digitized and shared the films online, despite lack of permission from the copyright holder.

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Orphan film users form a geographically diverse community that uses online technologies to connect and share information (Fisher & Durrance, 2003). Yet the technological revolutions that have made the orphan film community possible have also threatened the film format, regarded by many in this community not only as a preservation medium (Feeney et al., 2015, Gracy & Kahn, 2012) but as integral to the film viewing experience (Lail, 2013, Klare, 2018). Conversely, motion picture media has lagged behind in the digitizing and uploading process that has made print collections more accessible. Horak (2007) suggested in a recent article that format transitions decrease access to film, estimating that 15% to 20% of the existing material is left behind due to expense. At the same time, scholarly interest in using film is on the rise, expanding beyond the traditional confines of film or media departments (Emanuel, 2012, Mathews, 2012).

This paper will examine the scholarly literature by researchers from the LIS, film, and archival fields that examines user behavior around motion picture media. It will address issues pertinent to the orphan film community, including access, preservation, copyright, and format. The paper will explore the tensions inherent in a community that both uses and combats new technologies, and will look to the past to suggest new ways libraries can serve orphan film lovers.

Literature Review

Collectors

Before there were archives and other institutions collecting films there were amateur collectors. Legend has it that Henri Langlois used the collection he stored in a bathtub to found the Cinémathèque Française (Horak, 2001). Amateur collectors continue to be a key element of

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the orphan film community; like Langlois, they saw value in film artifacts most saw as disposable. Lee & Trace's (2009) study of hobbyist collectors provides a model for film collector behavior. Studying a community of rubber duck collectors, the authors identified behaviors including finding objects, caring for them, finding historical information about them, and finally sharing them (Lee & Trace, 2009). They concluded that collecting is active and selective, involves an element of passion, organization, and the development of knowledge (Lee & Trace, 2009). Case (2010) studied coin collectors' online behavior and found that collectors used the Internet as a source for information about collectibles as well as for their acquisition. He concluded that collectors are also producers of information: "The production of distinctions among items...comprises much of the work of collecting subcultures" (Case, 2010, p. 4).

The general interest book *A Thousand Cuts: The Bizarre Underground World of Collectors and Dealers Who Saved the Movies* (Bartok and Joseph, 2016) profiles a group of film collectors from diverse backgrounds. The authors document the passion that drives collecting behavior, and present anecdotal evidence that the majority of collectors are white males past middle-age who began collecting films in their youth, driven by a desire to control their access to these films (Bartok & Joseph, 2016). Wilson (2009) echoes this demographic assessment in his profile of another film collector. However, younger film fans (of both genders) continue to start new collections, still motivated by access. In the post-video era, the access they seek is to more obscure titles and genres than their predecessors (Bartok & Joseph, 2016).

Archives and Libraries

Several studies document the lack of film material available through libraries and other institutions. Emanuel (2011) studied libraries and archives in two major metropolitan areas (Los

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Angeles and Paris) from the perspective of the academic film researcher, concluding that libraries' film and video collections have been left behind even as book collections and journal databases migrate online, becoming more accessible. The case study of a university film collection shows that some institutions are unaware of their own holdings. The university in the study failed to list in its catalog one-third of the films in its collection, and for many items the only information was the title. (Feeney et al., 2015).

Even when a collection is catalogued, locating information can still be challenging. In a study of a year's worth of email queries to a German film archive, the researcher concluded that indexing terms were often limited to production-related attributes and reflected an archivist's view of films rather than a user's (Hertzum, 2002). Other sources confirm the difficulty of indexing and cataloging visual media in a text-based environment. (Mathews, 2012, Mehr and Archer, 1994). A more recent study of archive user behavior at an archive primarily serving media professionals confirmed Hertzum's (2002) finding that the majority of users search for known items and noted the prevalence of keyword searches, despite other options (Huurnink et al., 2010). A survey of users of C-SPAN's online digital video library asked what functions and other characteristics users desired, and found that retrieval functionality was the most frequently mentioned of the major categories (Albertson & Ju, 2015).

A qualitative study of seven archivists at a variety of institutions identified their concerns about digitizing film media, which ranged from fear of being overwhelmed with new users to concerns about imperfectly understood copyright law (Gracy, 2013). Copyright issues can prevent sharing film through exhibition or reuse by collectors, scholars, and filmmakers as well as archivists (Bartok & Joseph, 2016, Mathews, 2012, Nolan, 2003). Many archivists in the study

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prioritized speed and cost over image quality (Gracy, 2013) when it came to digitizing motion picture material, although Albertson & Ju (2015) found that image quality was an important criteria for users.

The Film Medium

The film medium is just as important as the content of a film, and many collectors argue for the visual superiority of film over other formats (Lail, 2013). Standard archival practice is to preserve an object in its original format (Horak, 2006). The film medium requires careful storage and handling demanding a certain level of expertise, a challenge for both amateur and institutional collectors (Bartok & Joseph, 2016, Feeney et al., 2015, Gracy & Kahn, 2012). At the University of Arizona, professors used mechanical projection to show films in class, with many students reporting preferring projection to streaming (Feeney, et al., 2015). Horak (2006) notes that there are fewer silent film titles available on DVD than on 16mm at his institution, suggesting that, despite technical challenges, 16mm may offer access to more motion picture titles.

Methodology

Use of the term “Orphan film” is relatively recent and the orphan film community is quite young; the first orphan film symposium was held in 1999 (Streible, 2007). As a result, research on the orphan film community from the LIS perspective is quite sparse. My strategy was to find articles that broadly addressed the behaviors of film users, and then to use King Library’s One Search function and film-related databases to locate sources specifically about orphan film users.

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Although I explored other databases, including the Library and Information Science Collection, Sage, and LIS retrospective, the Library & Information Science Source provided the majority of relevant material. Once I had identified the most relevant articles, I used article footnotes and Web of Science's citation search tool to identify additional sources. I also looked through the Info 200 provided list "Information Communities: Theoretical and Applied Research" focusing on the "special interest groups" section.

Finally, I searched online for websites where orphan film lovers interacted. The orphan film symposia websites were useful, as were the primarily hobbyist collecting sites, including 8mm Forum, 16mmFilmtalk, and 8mm-16mm forum worldwide. I also searched for a former print publication for film collectors, *Big Reel*, and found it had a website presence, including a comment page. Also valuable was the Prelinger Archives, an online archive hosting nearly 7,000 films that fall into the orphan film category, including home movies, social guidance films, and newsreels. Users can watch online or download, and each film page features a comments field, where users post information, reviews, or other remarks.

Discussion

In 2007 Streible said of the orphan film community's diverse members, "professional boundaries between academic, archivist, and artist are best blurred" (p. 125). While the community falls into two distinct groups, the informal/hobbyist collectors and the institutional/archivist collectors of orphan film media, there is evidence of interaction between the two and a growing sense that they exist on the same spectrum rather than in separate worlds. Archives are founded or existing archives change their policies to collect, preserve and provide access to

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marginalized materials and media that have previously been the province of informal/hobbyist collectors (Wakimoto, Hansen, & Bruce, 2013), and archivists and collectors now mingle online, as a collector forum comment congratulating “our archivist and forum friend” illustrates (Brandenstein, 2018). These two types of collectors share similar information needs, whether the film collection is stored in a garage or an archival vault. The model of collector behavior developed by Lee & Trace (2009) is a useful lens for looking at this information community’s behavior, which can be grouped into the activities of finding films, caring for films, finding information about films and sharing films.

Information Theories and the Orphan Film Community

Two definitions of information are particularly relevant for this community, Dervin’s concept of information as a sense-making activity and Goguen’s definition of information as the interpretive work of a social group (Bates, 2010), both of which reflect this community’s behavior as not only information seekers, but also information creators (Case, 2010). The concept of everyday life information seeking (ELIS) clearly applies to the hobbyist collectors (Savolainen, 2010), but also to the film scholars, such as Leonard Maltin, whose collecting activities precede and transcend his work as a film scholar (Bartok & Joseph, 2016). Collectors function as the “citizen experts” described by Hartel, Cox, & Griffin (2016) in their study of serious leisure, and these citizen experts can evolve into scholars and archivists, as was the case with Rick Prelinger. From this we see that roles are not static in the orphan film community. The ecological model Savolainen (2010) describes is a useful way of looking at this community, taking into account members’ diverse individual backgrounds as well as shared social networks.

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Erdelez's (1999) concept of information encountering applies to this community, where the serendipitous encounter or miraculous flea market find is a common trope in film collecting stories. Members of this community are super-encounterers, moving between past, present, and future information needs and adjusting behavior based on their encounters (Erdelez, 1999).

Filmmaker Jay Rosenblatt noticed a pile of films in a dumpster and reused the footage to make a short film (Nolan, 2003); preservationist Kevin Brownlow's random purchase of the film *Napoleon* in childhood, led to decades spent restoring the 35mm version (Bartok & Joseph, 2016). The emphasis on serendipity makes the concept of information grounds where information is shared spontaneously in the course of other activities (Savolainen, 2010) of key importance. Information grounds for this community include film screenings, archival visits, or symposia. Filmmaker and collector Craig Baldwin advised those seeking orphan film footage to "hang out with filmmakers and become part of the scene." (Nolan, 2003).

Finding Films & Film Information: Searching for Visual Media in a Text-Based World

Whether looking for films to purchase or view, orphan film seekers face challenges both in the online auction environment and in using library and archive catalogs. A recurring theme in the research is the difficulty of searching for visual media in a text-based world (Emanuel, 2012, Mathews, 2012, Mehr and Archer, 1994). Evidence shows that most users search using known item terms—that is, for a particular title, performer, production company, etc. (Hertzum, 2002, Huurnink et al., 2010). This is born out in online forums where most posts in "wanted" threads include a specific film title or performer (8mm-16mm Forum Worldwide, 2007). A basic difficulty in some institutional collections is inadequate cataloging (Emanuel, 2012, Feeney, et al., 2015), which has repercussions beyond frustrated users; Feeney et al. (2015) noted in her

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study of the University of Arizona's film collection that its circulation statistics were affected, leading to a perception that the film collection was irrelevant and should be deaccessioned; it was this process that led to a closer examination of the film collection and the discovery of both rarities and films that were relevant to the institution's scholarly community.

Finding Film: Opportunities for Libraries

Although significant resources in terms of time and labor are required to create adequate records for film titles, this is an essential task, which can reward libraries with increased collection use (Feeney et al, 2015). Several studies of archival searches propose speech recognition, automated description of visual media and other currently expensive and inaccessible tools as a solution to finding visual media (Albertson & Ju, 2015, Hertzum, 2002, Huurnink et al, 2010). A more cost-effective solution might be to follow the collaborative method Lingel (2012) described that allowed volunteers to create a catalog for the Occupy movement in Zucotti park. Similarly, a crowd-sourced model helps users find material in the Prelinger Archives. User-entered comments are key-word searchable, and often include visual descriptions and shot lists (Internet Archive, n.d.).

Caring for Film

Celluloid is a challenging medium, both to store and to screen. Collector sites share a substantial amount of information about storage conditions, vinegar syndrome (a kind of decay particular to film) and projector operation and maintenance (16mmFilmtalk.com, n.d., Steve Osborne's *The Reel Image: The World Wide Super 8/16mm Collector/Maker's Magazine!*, n.d.). Gracy & Kahn (2012) write that libraries often lack media preservation specialists, and although film is still considered by many the best preservation format, the cost of striking a new print from

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a deteriorating print can be prohibitively expensive for many institutions. As archives face the pressure to digitize their collections, resources are shifted from preservation and digitization becomes the de facto replacement for print (Gracy, 2013).

Caring for Film: Opportunities for Libraries

This lapse from traditional preservation practice is a serious concern, especially given the uncertainty about digital files as a stable technology. Libraries and archives might consider shifting from the either/or paradigm that dominates the discussion of preservation and digitization, and think creatively about ways the old and new technologies can coexist and support each other, a topic that will be addressed in more detail in the next section.

Sharing Film: Exhibition, Online Streaming, Artist Mashups and More

Collectors, among them many former projectionists, regularly share their films at informal screenings (Bartok & Joseph, 2016) as well as collector conferences such as Cinecon. They may also collaborate with institutions to provide prints for public screenings (Horak, 2006). At the same time, significant collections have been digitized and made available online, although Mathews (2012) found that the graduate students she surveyed lacked information about these sources. It seems apparent that these two modes of sharing film serve different, if overlapping functions; collectors' informal screenings operate as a sort of information grounds, where information is exchanged as a secondary activity to the business of watching a movie (Savolainen, 2010). Digital video is preferred for research although it also serves as entertainment. Of course, film screenings have their scholarly component as well, since mechanical projection is part of film history (Feeney et al., 2016); and screenings can still function as an information grounds when the projection is digital.

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A third mode of sharing that deserves mention is creative reuse of media by filmmakers who create new movies out of archival material (Bracha, 2010, Nolan, 2003). While the celluloid material can be literally reused, as filmmaker Jay Rosenblatt did for many of his short films (Nolan, 2003), digitization has made movie mashups a common form online (Harlan, Bruce & Lupton, 2012).

Uncertainty about exhibition rights and fair use under copyright law adversely affects all these modes of sharing. Film collectors were investigated by the FBI in the 1970s, inhibiting their trading and screening behavior (Bartok & Joseph, 2016). Although the FBI no longer pursues collectors, sales of film prints are still technically in violation of the law (Horak, 2006). Many (although not all) archivists are hesitant to digitize and stream films without copyright permission (Gracy, 2013) and scholars (Mathews, 2012) and filmmakers (Nolan, 2003) are uncertain of their rights when it comes to reusing media, whether for art or to illustrate academic research.

Sharing Film: Opportunities for Libraries

Given that “unrestricted access to information and ideas regardless of the communication medium used” is a key element of the American Library Association’s (2008) statement on intellectual freedom, libraries have an imperative to support the orphan film community’s initiatives to lift onerous copyright restrictions. The orphan film community has succeeded in updating the copyright act to permit archives and libraries to preserve moving images during the last 20 years of their copyright term (Streible, 2007), but more work remains.

There is also an opportunity for libraries to collaborate with collectors in their community to screen rare and little-seen films, and to use these “citizen experts” as a resource for projection

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and preservation information. This is information librarians once possessed, as Jenkins documents in her fascinating history of rural libraries and their use of non-theatrical film (orphan film by this paper's definition). Jenkins (2018) writes that progressive librarians once viewed film as "another format of information, equal to print," and describes bookmobiles that carried loaner films and projectors to rural users. Feeney et al. (2015) noted the appeal mechanical projection held for modern college students, many of whom preferred it to digital streaming. Film and projection might find a place in library maker spaces where other kinds of hands-on experiences are offered. Germain (2012) suggests that promoting the film collections of university libraries can benefit the library in general: "It is often the one part of the collection that seems less rigorous than other more academic choices. By promoting these collections, patrons will find the library to be a more inviting place to visit." (p. 177).

Conclusion

Orphan film community members are passionate about the cultural heritage embodied in motion picture media. Although from diverse backgrounds they follow the model of hobbyist collector behavior, and connect online and in person to find and share films, as well as exchange information about their care and about individual film titles. Although there is growing interaction between informal and institutional collectors, more is possible, with benefits on both sides. Libraries have the opportunity to collaborate with their individual collectors in screenings that would drive interest in libraries and enhance their own collections, which need to be cataloged and accessible. Libraries can also act as information sources on the confusing issue of copyright law and as advocates for intellectual freedom and access to orphan film media.

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