

Preserving a 'Way of Seeing': Post-archival Film Preservation

'It's only plastic!'

--Sean Kelly (former collegian) on the fetishisation of cellulose nitrate film

A great deal has happened since I finished my dissertation and handed it in, the day before I was to attend the 30th edition of the Giornate del Cinema Muto. Former colleagues and friends from archives have lost or changed jobs, as well as a friend who was a film projectionist. Tacita Dean exhibited 'Film' at the Tate, for which a brilliant anthology was produced, echoing much of what I had written and cited in my thesis. There have been some heated debates on the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) Listserv about the impending death of physical film. And perhaps most alarmingly, the fates of the biggest film stock manufactures are decidedly uncertain. I came to Pordenone, not as a film critic concerned with the aesthetics of individual films and their place within a canon of neglected film culture, but as a cinephile and hopeful film archivist and preservationist. My dissertation was a detailed theoretical examination into the importance of film as a physical, material artefact, distinct and inseparable from the idea of mere content, as a kind of ahistorical commodity. This was largely inspired by a dialogue given by Paolo Cherchi Usai and Kevin Brownlow called 'Saving Motion' which tried to highlight the importance of the material characteristics of film, in relation to its digital reincarnation and its place and history within a now almost entirely digital world (as I write this, the last analogue broadcast in the United Kingdom has been and gone).

This essay has been through several incarnations due to my misguided attempts to try and pursue this line of thought with regards to what I experienced at the festival. My initial proposal

stated that the history of film preservation is too narrow, in that it has always focused on the preservation and restoration, of both the film artefact and content, with the aim being to keep the content as close to the 'original' as possible in order for it to be exhibited at some point in the future. I wished to explore how the Giornate del Cinema Muto not only exhibited films that had been preserved and restored but how it preserved a 'way of seeing' and fostered a particular type of community. I had envisaged this to mean the exhibition of original film formats in a traditional theatre setting but in light of relentless digitisation, I am not convinced this is a worthwhile avenue to explore. Too much has been written and there is little to add to the ever increasing din. Even reading collegium papers from former colleagues, I was shocked by the prescience of collegium lectures given by such figures as Alexander Horwath on the materiality of film and its artefactual status. Rixt Jonkman, my former colleague from the nitrate department at eye Film Institute (née Netherlands Filmmuseum) described how it would be useful to display individual frames from films at museums, in order to ally the technological and artistic filmmaking process with its history. Content is something to be consumed but archives, museums and even festivals must surely have more demanding duties than mere preservation and exhibition of content. Indeed, the importance of more difficult and challenging material aspects of film history were brilliantly highlighted in the form of the Turconi collection. It was Rixt's thought that immediately brought to mind this expansive cache of frames to mind. The Turconi collection, being completely impossible to exhibit in the traditional filmic sense, via projection, is a major point in case when highlighting the material history of film and the ongoing importance of showing it in its original form when possible. We are not able to project the Turconi frames or view them in their original context but that does not negate the vast amount that can be learned from them. Even though the primary route of access to the frames is now via an online database and therefore a digital surrogate, the user is still confronted with the medium of film in these cuttings and cannot escape the physical reality of their history. What was previously disposable ephemera is now invaluable film history.

One of the films which brought home the artefactual existence of film more than any other was *Tonaufnahmen Berglund* (1922) presented by the Swedish Film Institute in 35mm. What was so striking about this film was not that it was a 'sound' film (quite literally) being presented at a silent film festival but that it was a film inseparable from its medium. We are not witnessing normal figurative content, through the medium of film at twenty four frames per second, but rather an image of variable area optical sound itself. The film unwittingly morphs into an abstract, almost Viking Eggeling-esque avant-garde piece, the symmetry between movement, shape and sound as beautiful as if it were a synchronised sound film spoken by actors. When an audience watches a typical narrative film, they are not necessarily seeing the medium. The soundtrack is hidden to the side, it could be any number of gauges, bases and processes. It could be an original nitrate print, or a digital file. Watching *Tonaufnahmen Berglund*, we as an audience could not escape the reality of the medium: we are witnessing that which is ordinarily hidden, as if it were the excess of a canvass, stretched and nailed around a wooden frame. Despite the lengthy preservation process which saw the disparate nitrate originals turned into a positive, then a digital file and then a new 35mm optical print and finally a presentation print – the medium is still kept. In this case, the film 'artefact' has not been preserved at all, but rather the explicit representation of the medium of film has been preserved instead, supplanting the importance of the 'original' and allowing the vision of Berglund to be seen by a contemporary audience.

A similar line of thought was expressed when Paolo Cherchi Usai accurately declared the novel thought that preservation of the film is not complete until screenings occur. Film preservation should not begin and end with the accurate preservation of film content and the safeguarding of its physical state. This is where the Giornate fills the next logical step in preservation, by exhibiting major restored canonical works alongside eclectic, highly niche films, often far removed from the canon and history books. In this way, the audience is party to the preservation process and it is this community of varied but complementary people that can complete a highly complex preservation process often assumed to end at the laboratory or archive stage. Through bringing together

academics, students, filmmakers and various industry professionals, the Giornate is capable of extending the preservation process even further, beyond even the exhibition stage. It is this sense of community that is the Giornate's greatest asset. After the artefact and its content are preserved, it is of the utmost importance that it is exhibited in a context that as far as possible resembles its original exhibition. Obviously for silent cinema, this requires the added complication of musical accompaniment, which is another area where the Giornate excels.

Even considering the festival's faithfulness to the medium of film, what struck me the most and stays with me is how the festival preserves its sense of community, that aspect so integral to the film watching experience; the audience. I am in no doubt that the festival will continue to show film prints as far as possible, as this is the favoured medium of the majority of archives that supply the festival. The encroachment of digital in a traditional arena of film is another essay, one that has been written several times now. The digital versus analogue debate is becoming worn (certainly for exhibition) and now what is of paramount importance is the preservation and expansion of not only an audience, but a community. The continuing support of preserving a 'way of seeing' in terms of musical accompaniment and projecting original materials can to an extent, be taken for granted. What cannot be taken for granted is the preservation of the audience, a really rather remarkable feat achieved by the Giornate, in a way that very few film festivals are capable of. Perhaps the pinnacle of this is the collegium (and I say this not because I am a Collegian), whereby young people from around the world with a deep passion for film are brought together. Reading past collegium papers, I was astonished by how many people I knew directly or had met briefly from my time studying film archiving in Norwich and Amsterdam. That acted as testament to the importance of the collegium. The festival is infiltrated by these curious minds on a yearly basis and in this way the audience can grow and the community can be enriched. If it sounds trite, it is not, as a community is the hardest thing of all to preserve in such a climate. Festival goers at the Giornate are united to a degree far removed from any other film festival I have attended and the serendipitous discoveries that happen there and common links to other people cannot be underestimated.

Upon leaving one of the final screenings of the festival (The Wind), I was walking across the piazza with another collegian when he asked what I thought of the film. I responded that I was 'blown away', not realising the terrible pun leaving my lips and that the person I was speaking to was a journalist sensitive to such things. I stand by that statement and maintain that I was not only 'blown away' by Sjöström's The Wind but by the festival as a whole, the collegium and its ability to foster a community of academics, archivists, collectors, students – cinephiles of silent cinema, to an extraordinary degree. This was the most virtuoso feat of preservation accomplished by the 30th Giornate and long may it continue far into the future.