

A Short History of Film Archiving

This article was first given as a paper on the study day, 'Film Archives and Collections: Exploring the Sector' held at Birkbeck College for the AHRB Centre for British Film & Television Studies. Luke McKernan is Head of Information at the British Universities Film & Video Council.

Last Friday evening, at the Scala Theatre, was an occasion in many respects as significant and memorable as it was wonderful. It may be left for future generations to realise the full extent of its importance – men and women yet unborn who, by the magic of a little box and a roll of film, will be enabled to witness the marvels of a hundred years before their age, in all the colour and movement of life.

Perverse old grandfathers will no longer be able to indulge disdainfully in reminiscences of the superiority of the times 'when they were boys'; the past will be an open book for all to read in, and, if the grandfathers exaggerate, they may be convicted by the camera's living record. Man has conquered most things; now he has vanquished Time. With the cinematograph and the gramophone he can 'pot' the centuries as they roll past him, letting them loose at will, as he would a tame animal, to exhibit themselves for his edification and delight. The cinematograph, in short, is the modern Elixir of Life – at any rate, that part of life which is visible to the eye. It will preserve our bodies against the ravages of age, and the beauty, which was once for but a day, will now be for all time.

The above is a review of a notable film from 1912, *The Coronation Durbar at Delhi*, filmed in the early colour process Kinemacolor, and produced by Charles Urban. It raises a number of points relevant to a consideration of the history of film archiving. In the

first instance, it expresses a sentiment central to any film archiving operation, viewing film as a time machine that will make the past or present visible to grateful future generations. Calls for film archives were common in the early years of filmmaking in this country, and it was notable news or actuality films such as that of the Delhi Durbar which were cited as suitable examples for inclusion, not fiction films, unless they perhaps recorded the performance of some notable stage performer. The review presupposes that future generations will share the same interests as those in 1912, in this case in a pageant of Empire, or that they will still view such a film in the same spirit as when it was made. And, despite its romantic fervour, the passage does acknowledge some limitation of the film record, which can only confer immortality on what is visible to the eye.

The next point is that the Kinemacolor film of the Delhi Durbar is considered to be a lost film. No print is said to survive in any of the world's film archives, and only 88 years later those future generations are denied the chance to see what would certainly be a film of considerable interest to us still, from a number of perspectives. The Delhi Durbar film was made over twenty years before any national film archive had been established, and the company that made it and most of its Kinemacolor productions were lost to history, neglected or destroyed once

they became of no financial value.

But there is a further, archival twist to the tale, because no longer is the Kinemacolor Delhi Durbar film a lost film. A portion of it has been discovered, in the Krasnagorsk film archive in Russia. Lost films are just occasionally rediscovered, and this film had been lurking in an unsuspected corner of the film archiving world, hidden under a different name for all those 88 years. But the twists of fate continue, because it is not the whole of the film that has survived. The original film lasted almost three hours – what has survived is around twenty minutes, and that of mostly uninteresting military reviews that took place after the main Durbar ceremonies, and it does not feature the spectacular main ceremonies, parades of elephants, and so forth. A fragment from the edges of a greater thing is all that now exists, its story perhaps more interesting that the film that survives itself.

Why the film survives in this form gives us a further lesson in the nature of film archives and their holdings. This particular section was extracted from the main film when the First World War broke out, and any film of troop movements was considered good box office. Film has this particular quality as a medium, whereby you can cut pieces out of it and create a whole new work, like some biological process. Film can not only be re-edited, it can give birth to new works out of itself. The Durbar film had been catalogued in the

Russian archive as a First World War production, which in terms of this particular edit's production history was quite correct. The film was only found because a film researcher was looking for footage to go into a television production on the history of the British Empire, and so the film finds itself a new home and a new identity, and in the form of the edited television programme will eventually reside in a television archive. Such are the complexities of the medium, and how a film survives and where alters its history and its meaning for those who care for it, or wish to learn from it.

Film is not the elixir of life, and we now put in qualifications before even considering it as a time machine. That we have come to question its messages has not lessened its importance, however – indeed the film record becomes all the richer for the multiplicity of ways in which it can be interrogated. But there is some irony

in the fact that when film archives were eventually established in the 1930s, it was largely not from an impulse to preserve actuality records of the past that would otherwise vanish, but to preserve the best of what was seen as the 'art of film'. That is a simplification, certainly (it ignores the anomalous existence of the Imperial War Museum, which undertook to preserve official film records of the First World War from its inception in 1917), and there was effort made to preserve what were seen as news and actuality records of value, but the people who founded and manned the first film archives were brought up on the burgeoning art film movement (notably Soviet films) of the 1920s, and were particularly activated by the threat to

silent films by a callous film industry which had now discovered sound. A statement made at the founding of the Museum of Modern Art's Film Library in New York in 1935 makes the aims clear:

The art of the motion picture is the only art peculiar to the twentieth century. As an art it is practically unknown and unstudied. ... This new and living form of expression, a vital force in our time, is such a young art that it can be studied from its beginnings; the 'primitives' among the movies are only forty years old. Yet the bulk of all films that are



A reconstructed colour image from the rediscovered Delhi Durbar film

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important historically or aesthetically, whether foreign or domestic, old or new, are invisible under existing conditions. To preserve these films and make them available to the public for study and research is the aim of the new Film Library.

The focus was to be the film that was deemed important, historically or aesthetically, a selectivity borne partly out of limited resources, but also out of a quite particular view, from a particular point in time, of what sort of film should be preserved and made available for study.

Those words 'to preserve' and 'to make available' are of course central to the purpose of a film archive. It is possible to be quite prescriptive about what a film archive

should be, and it follows rules laid down to a large extent by the first film archives, following from the particular nature of the medium itself. An archive, according to the dictionary, is 'a repository of public records or of records and monuments generally'. A film archive, however, means a particular process by which a film repository is maintained. A collection of videos on a shelf is not a film archive. It will not last; it preserves nothing. Inherent in any film archive with a true 'public good' remit is that word 'preservation'. Film is a fragile medium, and in going

through a mechanical process each time it is viewed necessarily suffers from wear-and-tear, as well as being subject to inevitable chemical decay that affects both nitrate and acetate film stock. A principle was of acquiring, in simple terms, a master copy which would then remain inviolate and unviewed, with duplicate printing material and then a viewing print being made from this original, subject to funds, which would

then become the copy to which the public could have access for study. This basic principle has been the cause of no end of trouble for film archives, which have been too often seen as preventing material from being seen, sitting on it until those future generations should get the benefit, not realising that posterity might just be now. The history of the national film archive in this country illustrates something of the changing territories and priorities for moving image archives. In 1935 the British Film Institute established a National Film Library, with the aim of creating a 'repository of films of permanent value'. It was recognised even then that an ideal archive would preserve every film, its Committee noting that

'every film has a historical value of some kind'. But limited resources imposed selectivity. It was also recognised that a system of statutory deposit would be essential if the archive were not to be continually holding out a begging bowl. Sixty-five years on it is still waiting for such a system to be instituted (however, a partial system of statutory deposit has existed for commercial British television since 1990).

The National Film Library became the National Film Archive in 1955, by which change of name it posted that its prime purpose was not to be a lending service but to preserve. A further name change in 1993 to the National Film and Television Archive made clear a responsibility for both media that had in fact been in force for some while. Now the archive has undergone a further change of name, absorbed within a larger concept of BFI Collections, reflecting a BFI wish to streamline its operations, and maybe expressing a fear of that very word 'archive', with all its connotations of something had hides its treasures away, promising them only for that posterity that never comes.

There are in fact four national film archives in this country: the BFI's, the Imperial War Museum's Film and Video Archive, the Wales Film and Television Archive and the Scottish Screen Archive. All are recognised by FIAF, the international federation of film archives, which also has as a member the North West Film Archive. The North West is one of a network of eight so called regional film archives, a network which has been growing since the founding of the East Anglian Film Archive in 1976. All of these archives are represented collectively as the Film Archive Forum. This blossoming of what have been best described as public sector moving image archives shows how really the concept of a 'national film archive' is now wider than one institution could or should represent, and reflects in particular moving image productions made for and by local communities that were not considered when the notion of a 'repository of films of permanent value' was first put forward. The

'national film archive' has become a collective responsibility.

In short, the focus has shifted, and our sense of film history and film culture has shifted. That history and that culture is, or should be, a far broader and more complex picture than the traditional history of cinema which the national film archives were founded to preserve. It is necessary to put in that qualification, because we need to reflect on why the attention of students and researchers is drawn to certain sectors of the overall national film archive, and not to others. To what extent is there a canon of films obscuring the value of other film holdings, other histories of cinema? What can be done to encourage academic or creative interest in the less frequented corners? Is such a potential interest justified? What can the history of film teach us that the history of cinema does not?

There are many kinds of film archives and film collections in this country. The British Universities Film & Video Council's *Researcher's Guide* now identifies some 450 moving image collections in the UK that are open to some degree or other to researchers. They range from stock shot libraries to newsfilm libraries to subject specialist collections to television libraries. Few are concerned with preservation, but without preservation we will end up with no film heritage at all. We must never forget this. Meanwhile, let us uncover and learn from all that we can. The variety and the complexity and the richness of the moving image records of our time should not only entrance those future generations that were evoked in 1912, but demand our fullest attention here and now.

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