

Beyond distribution: some thoughts on the future of archival films

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In this essay we wish to reflect on the particular relevance to the topic of early cinema's distribution in the digital age. A decentralization of production – e.g. in terms of creative and discursive input – and the increase of cultural participation have fundamentally changed the traditional cultural and economical function of distribution. Now that we live, work, consume, and watch in a networked society, we can invent radically new systems of distribution – systems more attuned to the current demands for the circulation of cultural goods. In light of the new possibilities for (digital) distribution of today and tomorrow, the basic conception of distribution as the complex of *access*, *circulation*, and *exchange* as based on historical practices and market dynamics, needs rethinking.

Our main concern, here, is the impact of digitization on archival practices and how this may have its effects on contemporary distribution of archival films. At the end of this book we think it is useful to consider what happened, or what may happen, to the distribution of those films that were first distributed and exhibited a hundred years ago. The possibilities for restoration, storage, and exhibition, or “emanation”, have changed radically as a result of digitization. This calls for a re-conceptualization not only of what distribution is, but also of what it can be.

In the past, both archivists and researchers have shown ambivalent and sometimes rather conservative attitudes towards the possibility for distribution of archival films. While on the one hand we register a more conventional protectiveness of cultural heritage, more recently, however, we also witness enthusiastic, if not fairly a-critical attitudes towards the possibilities for ubiquitous and permanent availability as a result of digitization. These contradictory attitudes shift between the traditional ideal of “making available” – a *push* model – and ideals of individual, immediate, and on-demand access – a *pull* model, if you will.

In the case of early cinema we are intrigued by the way in which archival films have made a transition from being part of a “living” film culture – a culture in which contemporary films are distributed for theatrical screening – to being part of an archival collection and being distributed digitally – in on-line catalogues, on DVDs, for theatrical screenings, or live performances. This transition is taken a step further, to a maybe more radically new “new life”, when archival films become *content* – a content which is not distributed, but *grabbed* by the user. This material as well as functional transition may lead to what we can consider as an effacing of distribution.

Distribution of archival films

Simplifying things a bit, archival films are those films that have dropped out from active distribution. Once their commercial distribution has expired and they have ceased to circulate in the theaters, (some) film prints end up in the vaults of archives. It is at this point of “dead distribution” that it becomes relevant to make these films visible again. This new visibility – when old films are shown to new audiences – is obviously different from the initial distribution. Not only do the films circulate in a very different segment of exhibition venues, and are they shown to a new generation of spectators. Also, it is highly significant for this changed dynamics of distribution that the archive is often also the distributor *and* exhibitor – not to mention the fact that the circle of archive, distributor, exhibitor, and audience (in the case of early cinema so often the same crowd of people!) is a very intimate one.

However, even this form of archival distribution has changed over the years and is not a stable format for the “second run” for archival films anymore. Thanks to the countless digital scenarios that are envisioned daily, it could change even more radically in the near future. But before discussing this notion of (digital) archival distribution – what it looks like today, and what it may become tomorrow – it is useful to take a look at how it has evolved over the years.

Since the early years, archivists have seen themselves as collectors and guardians of forgotten films.¹ Their goal was to protect film heritage – a heritage whose value not everybody could immediately recognize and understand. This enterprise was fueled with the excitement of preserving the endangered species of cinema’s history: the vanishing nitrate. Archivists have been aware of belonging to an elite – the happy few who can appreciate the importance, can recognize the beauty and, most importantly, who can be trusted with the fragility of these films. These are the fundamentals of the protective attitude that in the past has made archives difficult to be accessed, even by scholars who have the same attitude towards the treasures that the archives harbor. This attitude has long been necessary, until the recognition of archives’ institutional role in safeguarding cultural heritage in recent decennia.

The issue of copyrights has also played an important role in limiting the freedom of distribution of archival material, together with the fear for restrictions or financial consequences imposed by rights holders. With the exception of a relatively small number of films that were produced before a certain date – films that are within the *public domain* – all other films can be collected, stored and preserved in film archives but can not be shown without the rights holders’ permission – let alone be enjoyed in a renewed, archival distribution.² This situation is still quite complex and far from being resolved, even though many new possibilities for distribution are emerging as a result of digital technology – possibilities that may benefit both rights holders and archives. The consequences of the rights’ issue and new possibilities in this respect will be discussed below.

Although often necessary, the extreme protectiveness and the introvert nature that has characterized the attitude of most archives until recent years clearly prevented archival films from being seen and appreciated by a larger audience. Only since the late 1970s – and yet again, the FIAF Conference held in Brighton in 1978 cannot be ignored – archival films, especially silent films, have started to cross archive thresholds, since they are shown at specialized festivals such as Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, Il Cinema Ritrovato, The San Francisco Silent Film Festival and the Filmmuseum Biennale. At the same time, archives have started to make their programming activities better known to a larger audience and offer film programs for inter-archival distribution. Also, in recent decennia new means – both in terms of funding and technology – for film

preservation have made it possible to restore and show films that were previously only available as unique and “unshowable” nitrate prints.

Despite the fact that commercial distribution had long been regarded as a dangerous territory, a new form of distribution started to develop as the natural bridge between the archive and new potential audiences. In the last decennium a wider form of archival distribution has been put into practice. With the growth of most film archives – such as the British Film Institute, the MoMA, the Nederlands Filmmuseum – and thanks to the strong network of FIAF archives, it has been possible to present film programs not only locally – in the archives’ theaters – but also to have them tour other archives and art houses interested in finding audiences for these films.³

With a few years delay, when compared to commercial distribution, film archives also started new forms of distribution alongside traditional, theatrical distribution: videotapes first and DVDs later. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s many archives indeed offer feature films or compilations of shorts in these forms. Although this kind of videos and DVDs have a quite limited distribution, it cannot be denied that their relative low cost and flexibility has made it possible for archival films to become visible to a wider public.

Both theatrical distribution, through the network of archives, and the more open video and DVD distribution can be defined as a *chaperone model* of distribution. The archival films in these cases are brought to the public with the archive as chaperone protecting the films, and showing the way. In this chaperone model, archives present film programs as *selections* made by the archive that holds the films, often with the use of explanatory titles or with an accompanying catalogue, which explain (and justify) the archive’s choice and contextualize the films either historically or aesthetically. In the case of DVDs, the chaperone model is realized through the use of interfaces that offer this *interpretation key* to the viewer.⁴

This model can be partly explained by the fear of the “expert” that a contemporary audience needs help for understanding old films. This seems relevant if one thinks of the enormous differences between historically divergent cinematographic paradigms and visual cultures within which the films were once produced and now shown. On the other hand, the chaperone model also stands in the way of a direct and spontaneous appreciation of historical films by a contemporary audience, making the viewing experiences highly mediated with the interpretation-key as provided by the archive.

In a media culture such as the one that is taking shape today, in which large and vaguely defined *audiences* are more and more being replaced by individual *users*, the chaperone model does not seem to be so suitable anymore. Although it can still be useful for educational purposes, alongside it, it should allow for a more open and direct model.

Although it is only a recent phenomenon, the growing demand for archival films – often referred to as *content*, in new-media terminology – by a larger segment of *users* seems to be insatiable already. The demand for archival films is not only coming from researchers, but also from students (from more disciplines than only film or media studies!), found-footage filmmakers and artists, and from anonymous users everywhere on the Internet. Today’s user-audiences demand a direct access to content. Users do not want their content to be brought to them within a traditional distribution (push) model: they want to grab it, tap directly from its source (pull model). New systems of content distribution are being invented to satisfy this demand.

A good example is the principle of the so-called *Long Tail*, as discussed in the homonymous article published in *Wired* in 2004.⁵ The Long Tail model comprises a worldwide distribution system in which the relatively small number of mainstream

hits – the head of the demand curve (the blockbusters, in film terms) – is substituted by a large number of niches – the tail (the art film, but also the archival film). Thanks to the new ways of on-line distribution this system is becoming economically viable. The need for a large number of people in one place (the film theater) to justify high production and distribution costs, is replaced by the need to satisfy the largest number of individual users spread world-wide with (cheaper) niche products.

Also, it seems to be possible to tackle the complex rights issue. With this respect the recently developed *Creative Commons* license offers a very interesting alternative to traditional copyright legislations.⁶ Many archives look at Creative Commons because it facilitates distribution – especially on-line – keeping some of the original rights intact, but at the same time stimulating creative re-use of content. An ambitious example of an archival project that intends to use the Creative Commons license (where possible) in making hundreds of thousands of hours of video, film and audio content available on-line, has been recently submitted for financing to the Dutch Ministry of Culture.⁷

Although the conflict mentioned in the introduction between protectionism and openness (maybe a renewed version of the old Lindgren-versus-Langlois dispute) is getting more and more visible, archives, often pushed by funding entities and by growing users' demand, are quickly adjusting to this new phenomenon.⁸ Large-scale digitization projects of film collections have been intensively discussed in the last ten years by many archives. Different from broadcast archives, however, film archives still have to maintain film as a preservation medium, as digital alternatives today are not comparable yet with film in terms of life expectancy and quality. The consequence of this is that preservation costs cannot be reduced by film digitization. On the contrary: costs for digitization have to be added to the already existing costs for traditional preservation.⁹ Nevertheless, many archives are looking for means for digitizing their collections.

But, once the content will be available in digital form, what kind of access will archives grant to their users? Will they move on from the chaperone model to a new form of opener distribution?

Archival distribution or archives online?

Today we can see more and more examples of archival distribution on a relatively large scale. Some of the more well-known silent titles have recently been re-restored using digital technologies at high resolution. An obvious example is the digital restoration of *Metropolis* realized in 2001 by the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung and Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv. The use of digital technology for restoration provides the means to restore more in terms of image reconstruction, and it also provides a high quality master for all possible digital formats, scalable from HD to streaming formats. However, the kind of distribution that these films have experienced is quite similar to the already existing form of archival distribution used for traditionally restored films, only the potentials here are much bigger and it may provide a higher image quality in the future.¹⁰ In theory, digitized films could be offered on-line to viewers/users, but this is still rarely the case. A few exceptions can be found on a limited number of film archives' web sites where samples of their collections can be viewed (but rarely can be downloaded) at low resolution.

One can wonder why archives (and we refer here principally to non-profit and publicly funded archives) maintain a monopoly on their content, even though this could be offered freely to users in a digitized form. Is it fear of copyrights' issues? Is it the idea we discussed earlier that these films need a chaperone to escort them to the users? Or



Fig. 1. *Beyond the Rocks* (1922). [Courtesy of the Nederlands Filmmuseum.]

is it fear of losing their *raison d'être*? We think that all these reasons partially apply, and that there are probably even more reasons to be taken into account, not in the last place the obstacle of know-how and experience with digital technology – still scarce within film archives – as well as the high added costs we mentioned earlier.

We wish to argue that archives can (and should) make their collections available through both systems without losing their *raison d'être*, combining the archival distribution of the films in a chaperone model, with free accessibility of their collections on-line.

***Beyond the Rocks*: an example of archival distribution**

Beyond the Rocks (Sam Wood, 1922) is one of many mainstream films that have disappeared after having “lived” and circulated world-wide at the time of its production. The only film starring two of the biggest Hollywood stars of the Twenties, Gloria Swanson and Rudolph Valentino, *Beyond the Rocks* faded away after its commercial cycle, forgotten by the public and by the critics, who actually never considered it worth



Fig. 2. Interface of the 2006 DVD release of *Beyond the Rocks*. [Courtesy of Milestone Film & Video, design by Craig Cefola of Post Office.]

remembering. In the 1980s it was sadly established by film archivists and researchers (and by a disappointed Gloria Swanson, in her autobiography) that not a single print of this title was to be found. This is not an anomaly, however, since the majority of silent films have experienced the same fate. Between 2000 and 2004, a nitrate print of *Beyond the Rocks* miraculously resurfaced, reel by reel, from a private film collection that was donated to the Nederlands Filmmuseum by the family of a deceased Dutch collector. In 2005 *Beyond the Rocks* was restored by the Nederlands Filmmuseum and newly distributed.¹¹

Besides restoring the film in its “original”, silent version, the Nederlands Filmmuseum decided to produce a distribution version of *Beyond the Rocks* with a new soundtrack by Dutch composer Henny Vrieten. The production of this new version is in line with the Nederlands Filmmuseum’s tradition of the last fifteen years to present films to the public in new and alternative ways. Note that this presentation practice does not replace the traditional restoration process, as each title presented by the Nederlands Filmmuseum with a new score is first preserved and restored to its original, silent form.

In addition, a High Definition tape was produced, which is to be used as a master for digital projection, for the production of a DVD, and for TV broadcasting. The new sound version was shown in May 2005 on thirteen Dutch screens with three 35mm film prints and ten digital projections.¹² The film was also presented at several festivals, including the festivals in Cannes, London and New York, and the Filmmuseum Biennale in Amsterdam. Milestone Film and Video released the film theatrically in the US where since October 2006 it has been shown in more than twenty cities. In May 2006 it was broadcasted on Turner Movie Classics and in the fall of 2006 it will be broadcasted on Dutch television. Milestone has recently released a DVD in the US, while the Nederlands Filmmuseum will soon release a DVD for distribution in the Benelux.



Fig. 3. The Internet Archive, at <http://www.archive.org>

This is a clear example of archival distribution (push model) where a film, found, restored, and stored by a film archive, is chaperoned outside the archive's threshold to the largest public such a film can possibly find. A project like this ensures that the *raison d'être* of film archives is substantiated. This is the case despite the fact that this one film title represents only the tip of an iceberg – one of the hundreds of less glamorous titles that are annually restored. Still, thanks to its large exposure, a project like this reinforces the social and cultural function of film archives.

The internet archive: an example of archives online

A quite different example is represented by The Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org>), a non-profit organization founded in 1996 in San Francisco with the purpose of offering access to historical collections in digital format. The Internet Archive collaborates with institutions such as the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian and, today, its collection includes texts, audio, moving images, software and web pages. Although its main goal is to prevent *digitally born* material from disappearing, this on-line archive offers free access to a great quantity of *digitized* (film born) material as well.

With more than thirty thousand moving image items, The Internet Archive offers access to a wide collection of archival films, including many silent ones. Found footage, news reels, shorts as well as feature films, can be streamed or downloaded in various formats (e.g. mpeg1, 2, and 4, Cinepack and RealMedia). All kinds of material from new to early films can be found there – examples stretching from Méliès' *Le voyage dans la lune* (1902) to Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). All content is offered under Creative Commons' licenses, and, depending on the status of the material they can be public domain or other licenses accepted by the rights holders. In the case of film-born content the image quality and the available information regarding the source material that has been used may vary greatly. When the Library of Congress makes a film

available, for instance, it is possible to find out if the original material has been properly preserved and other sorts of information about the original film print are made available.¹³ In many other cases, however, we do not have insight in the source of the content, and therefore we do not know where the original film is available and taken care of, or if it is available at all, for that matter.

The Internet Archive clearly shows us an example of content availability very different from what we have called archival distribution. In comparison, the archive is (relatively) open and the user is (relatively) free. On the other hand, in the case of digitized films, it often lacks a clear and crucial link to the original film.

Beyond distribution

New forms of distribution can thus be envisioned today. With the speed possible with digital technology and the virtually ubiquitous reach of the Internet, we can imagine a truly new new life for archival films. In fact, this open-source ideal is remarkably in the same vein as the ideal of film as “living” medium, when digitization breaks open the “code” of films for manipulation and performative editing.¹⁴

When we ask ourselves what the effect is of the digital turn in archives with respect to distribution, digital practices and possibilities challenge ideas and ideals about matters of accessibility, thus, about distribution in the larger sense of the word. Archives can become more flexible: from centralized, geographical house of storage, the archive can be the platform for a flexible delivery of content.

Both models described above are necessary and desirable for the future visibility of archival films. But it should not be a matter of choice between the two. In fact, they are two faces of the same coin. On the one hand, the chaperone model for archival distribution guarantees a secure and proper preservation of the films, without which on-line accessibility would not even be possible. On top of that, it provides today, still, the *raison d'être* of film archives, specifically to their (specialised) public and their funding entities. It is, however, the online archive that allows for a visibility to a larger, contemporary audience: today's users, who demand direct access to content. Both “distribution” models, if the term distribution still applies, thus feed one another when open, on-line access can create new, varied, and specialised audiences, as well as new practices based on the creative re-use of, or inspiration by archival material. In our view, at this moment it is# the combination of these two models that will grant a true new life to archival films in the future.

Notes

1. For a comprehensive overview of the history of film archives see P. Houston, *The Keepers of the Frame. The Film Archives*, British Film Institute, London, 1994 and J. Ghislaine, *Film Archives in Europe* in Luisa Comencini and Matteo Pavesi (eds) *Restauro, conservazione e distruzione dei film/Restoration, Preservation and Destruction of Films* (Il Castoro, Milano, 2001).
2. The age by which artifacts pass on to the public domain is defined differently by each country of production. In the US, for example, it is films produced before 1923.
3. Examples of these touring programs are: *Dutch Silent Cinema* distributed by the Filmmuseum, *Biograph* distributed jointly by British Film Institute and the Filmmuseum, *American Beauties* by Library of Congress and *Unseen Cinema* by Anthology Film Archive.
4. Examples of archival DVDs are *Exotic Europe* and *Cinéma Perdu* (Filmmuseum), *Treasures From American Film Archives* (National Film Preservation Foundation), *Unseen Cinema – Early American Avant Garde Film 1894–1941* (Anthology Film Archive).
5. <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html> See also: <http://www.thelongtail.com>
6. <http://creativecommons.org>

7. The project *Beelden voor de Toekomst* (Images for the Future), is the result of a collaboration between the following Dutch institutions: the Nederlands Filmmuseum, the Institute for Sound and Vision (NIBG), the Centrale Discotheek Rotterdam, the National Archive, the Association of Public Libraries and the foundation Kennisland. The text of the project can be found on <http://www.kennisland.nl/nl/projecten/open-cultuur/Beelden-voor-de-Toekomst.html>
8. While Henri Langlois, the legendary co-founder and first director of the Cinémathèque Française, is traditionally associated with a policy of 'showing' as many films as possible from the archive (whatever their physical condition was), Ernest Lindgren, first curator of the National Film and Television Archive, is remembered as the man who put film preservation before everything else, including exhibition. For more on this, see Houston's *Keepers of the Frame* (1994). A friction between showing and preservation seems to be an unavoidable aspect of archival practice and the new possibilities offered by digital technology are adding new challenging perspectives to this complex matter. See also D. Nissen, L. Richter Larsen, T.C. Christensen, and J. Stub Kohnsen (eds), *Preserve Then Show* (Danish Film Institute, Copenhagen, 2002).
9. For more on this matter see G. Fossati, "Digital Technology Entering Film Archives" in Mieke Lauwers and Bert Hogenkamp (eds.) *Audiovisueel. SAP jaarboek* no. 5, Stichting Archiefpublicaties, Koninklijke Vereniging van Archivarissen in Nederland (KVAVN), 2006.
10. We refer here to the quality of the digital master that is used as the source for all digital by-products, from HD TV broadcast, to DVD to possibly on-line streaming.
11. For more information on the finding and restoration of *Beyond the Rocks* see: www.film-museum.nl/beyondtherocks
12. The digital distribution was carried out by CinemaNet Europe, a network of European art houses supported by the Media Plus Programme of the European Community. See: <http://www.cinema-neteurope.com>
13. We can for example read that the film *Buffalo Dance* (1894) was copied at 18 frames per second from a 35mm print preserved by the Library of Congress.
14. This it is not the same as found-footage films that are re-authored. We are talking here about user creativity.