

Fall 2016

Preservation First? Re-Viewing Film Digitization

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Recommended Citation

Lauren Tilton, "Preservation First? Re-Viewing Film Digitization," *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals* 12, no. 4 (2016): 391-199.

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COLLECTIONS

A Journal For Museum and Archives Professionals

From the Practical to the Philosophical

volume 12 *e* number 4 *e* fall 2016

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Cover Image: Faith in the City: Chicago's Religious Diversity in the Era of the World's Fair home page, visually showcasing the scale of the Newberry's holdings in church and synagogue records. All figures come from the site itself, which can be visited at <http://publications.newberry.org/faith>. Beta version as of April 2016. Official launch estimated for early 2017

Preservation First?

Re-Viewing Film Digitization



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Abstract This article addresses the politics of film digitization by arguing that we should reconsider archival and preservation “best practices” that require film restoration. Instead, it advocates for digitizing films “as is,” which, in turn, captures the film’s current materiality (i.e., fading, scratches, and other facets that reveal age, wear, and use). Using the work of Luis Vale, one of the youth filmmakers from New York City’s Lower East Side’s Young Filmmaker Foundation’s Film Club, as a case study, the article points to the importance of archiving and saving these youth films as part of a growing movement to look beyond Hollywood cultural production and preserving national moving image heritage. More broadly, this article highlights how archiving practices determine which histories are remembered and how.

Everyday, decisions are made about what and how we archive, who and what gets to be remembered (and forgotten), and how.¹ Emphasis has been placed on the importance of how film archives make history as well as preserve materials.² In other words, which films get archived determines whose film histories are valued. I want to take these concerns one step further by exploring the following questions:

1. The restoration of film to its “original” condition—a pristine print with no visible wear—is critical to film preservation. What is the impact on institutions, filmmakers, and communities when we subscribe to film archival and circulation practices that call for film preservation and access only in the original condition and format?
2. How might we reimagine the role of the digital as both a tool for access and a tool for doing justice to the stories the films communicate and represent?

To answer these questions, we will explore the history of a set of 16 mm community films from the 1960s and 1970s.

Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals, Volume 12, Number 4, Fall 2016, pp. 391–400. Copyright © 2016 Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. All rights reserved.

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Serving African American and Puerto Rican youth on New York City's Lower East Side, Young Filmmaker Foundation's Film Club placed cameras in the hands of youth of color as a way for them to participate in and shape how one's self and community were represented. It was a response to mainstream American media, which commonly depicted young men of color as juvenile delinquents.³ The call for participation at Film Club was part of a constellation of efforts for full national belonging by marginalized Americans, particularly of color. Participation meant nonviolent direct action such as bus boycotts, freedom rides, lunch counter sit-ins, and voter registration as led by African American civil rights movement. Participation involved community control and support through local policing and social services led by liberation movements such as the Black Panther Party. "Maximum feasible participation" involved including the poor in community action programs to eliminate poverty, as declared by war on poverty legislation. And, participation involved taking control of representation. With visibility and representation, a pivotal battleground, media was a powerful weapon against and for marginalized peoples across the United States, and became a site for radical politics.⁴

With cameras in their hands, youth accessed a new cultural outlet for self-expression. Many focused on how they negotiated drugs, poor living conditions, racism, and relationships in their daily lives.⁵ The process of making the films and the films themselves were practices and tools of resistance and demonstrated that youth could be the arbiters of how they and their communities were depicted. The films traveled across the streets of Manhattan, through museums like the Museum of Modern Art, into libraries, and onto prison walls. Yet now, many sit still on shelves, stowed away at institutional archives in the name of money, mainly the cost of preservation and restoration, or perceived disinterest. The digital offers an exciting opportunity for publics to watch these films and to do justice to their history and intent—to circulate and bring silenced communities and histories out of the shadows.

Learning the history of these films and workshops has been my project for the last three years. So, on a toasty early afternoon, I walked to Lincoln Center and through the glass doors of New York Public Library's (NYPL) Performing Arts Library. I proceeded to the elevator and entered with a man, who appeared to be in his mid-60s, clutching his tote. We exited on the fourth floor, and after checking my bag, I took my voice recorder, a piece of paper, and a pencil through security. The man remained asking the guard about his bag. The guard looked puzzled. Excitedly, I turned and asked if he was Luis Vale, one of the youth filmmakers who participated in Film Club, and whom the library's film archivist, Elena Rossi-Snook, and I were interviewing. Shyly, he responded in the affirmative. We proceeded past security and into a windowless room and pulled up three chairs to the Steenbeck.⁶ Vale's eyes lit up with excitement upon gazing on the equipment that had introduced him to filmmaking over 40 years ago in the first-floor workshop on the Lower East Side.



Figure 1. Young Filmmakers Foundation Distribution Pamphlet. Courtesy New York Public Library.

Recalling his initial experience with instructor Rodger Larson, Vale recalled, “He just gave us a camera and said, ‘Go to it.’ As we started editing they showed us a little bit on how to edit, how to splice, and things like that and said do your thing.”⁷ This philosophy of minimal instruction and learning through doing defined the youth film workshops across New York City throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, resulting in one of the best and largest collections of youth-made films; it was distributed by Film Club’s parent organization Young Filmmakers Foundation’s Youth Film Distribution Center. The NYPL purchased and lent films from the collection in the 1970s and 1980s. The lending collection along with a large acquisition of related films in the 1990s now comprise the Young Filmmakers Collection, an archive of over 45 films from Film Club and approximately 260 films in total from youth film workshops throughout the period.⁸

Vale proceeded to pull out a 16 mm tin and gently twisted the can open. Film chemicals rose from the celluloid. Rossi-Snook leaned in to inhale. Expecting her to snarl at the smell of vinegar (the most pungent sign of degraded film), she instead looked up curiously. I observed with a puzzled gaze as I knew the film was over 40 years old and I feared the harsh red tones we had become all too familiar with. She turned to Vale inquisitively. The print was in pristine condition. Elena delicately unspooled the 16 mm and placed the film on the machine’s rollers matching the sprockets. She turned a lever to the right and the film began flowing through as the image flickered on the screen. “I wrote the story [about] basically what I saw and what I wanted to convey,” Vale stated. The film opens with the following statement in Spanish and English:



Figure 2. Luis Vale. Courtesy Luis Vale.

This is the ghetto of the Lower East Side in New York City where people like us have grown up and lived under these conditions. It is up to the people of these communities to go out and to strive for something better. The Lower East Side is one of many slum neighborhoods in New York City. This community must unite so we can do something about this filth.⁹

The film articulated his frustration about the lack of concern for the neighborhood and the devastating impact of drugs, particularly heroin, which had permeated the inner city.¹⁰ With its focus on trash on the streets and inserting trash into people's bodies, the film is a call to action.

Speaking with the same clarity of purpose as his film, Luis reaffirmed the message 40 years later. "It's just don't let your environment or your neighborhood dictate what you want to do." Vale continued, "This is an experience of what you see and what you feel around you and what you witness," he added.¹¹ To bear witness and then act was the call of the film in 1970, and the call Elena and I felt again in 2015 in order to do justice to the film, filmmaker and its history. But how?

Eager to preserve his film, he agreed to support NYPL's restoration of the film culminating in a 16 mm preservation print for the Young Filmmakers Collection. This is an important act for the filmmaker and library. Institutions that house



Figure 3. Shots from *Life in New York*, 1971.

media archives are arbiters of access, deciding who and what is *approved* to enter *their* collections. (This is particularly an issue for film where a significant portion is in private archives.) The very effort to archive and save these youth films is part of a growing movement to look beyond Hollywood cultural production (and 35 mm) as the definition and measure of national moving image heritage.¹² They are part of an expanding focus on orphan films that garnered momentum beginning in the 1990s. At the forefront of this movement, Dan Streible defines orphans “as all types of neglected cinema. While a film might not be literally abandoned by its owner, if it is unseen or not part of the universe of knowledge about moving images, it is essentially orphaned.”¹³

The broader focus on identifying and acquiring orphan films is reshaping what kinds of moving images are valued and importantly diversifying archives in critical ways. Questions remain though about what to do with these moving images once they are in the archive. Best practices prioritize restoration and preservation in order to *save* and *protect* a national film heritage, a history Caroline Frick eloquently outlines in her work *Saving Cinema*.¹⁴ The celebration, even fetishization, of the pristine film print proves challenging for, and even blocks, the circulation of films. Each time a film moves across the projector it degrades. Well aware, many archives are wary of continued use. The issues are compounded

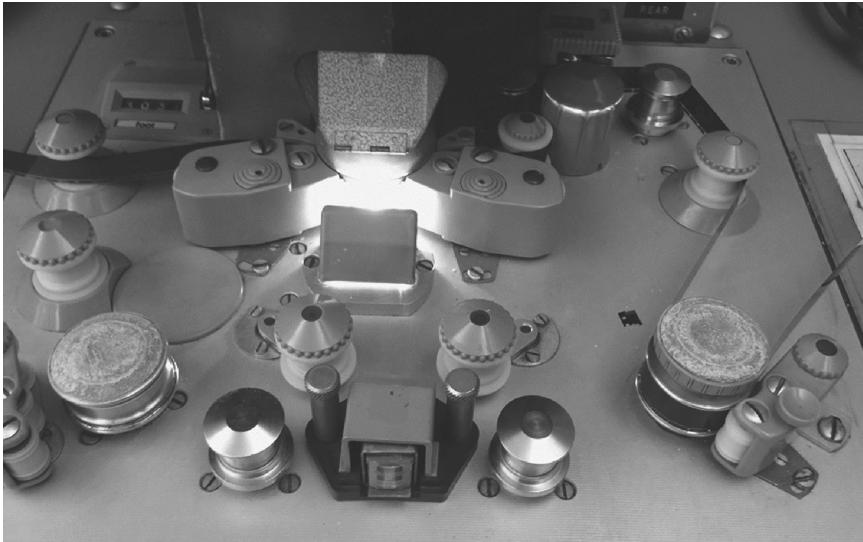


Figure 4. Steenbeck film editing machine and rollers. Courtesy of the author.

by the high cost of preservation and uncertain future of celluloid, which Kodak almost stopped producing in 2014 but was persuaded otherwise by industry leaders.¹⁵ As a result, the future is very precarious for the very materials current preservation and restoration practices rely on. With celluloid facing a precarious future, digitization offers interventions that are important for film archives, public humanities, and particularly for Luis Vale and the Young Filmmakers Collection. I want to highlight four ways.

First, digitizing the films reduces the amount of damage a film receives with each projection or showing, extends the catalog's longevity, and expands its reach. Digitization also helps guarantee the celluloid that remains will have a longer life (if stored properly) and therefore can be re-digitized later with future formats and standards.¹⁶ It also allows access without the need for expensive (as well as difficult to find and maintain) equipment.

Second, we should consider digitization with no restoration. This is at odds with the International Federation of Film Archives Code of Ethics, which states that "film archives and film archivists are the guardians of the world's moving image heritage. It is their responsibility to protect that heritage and to pass it on to posterity in the best possible condition and as the truest possible representation of the work of its creators."¹⁷ The result is a focus on auteurs and new fully restored film prints. But what if we shift our object of study? What if the films' historical and current audiences are as important as the creator? What if we want to understand if a film was seen and how often? The practice of digitizing films as is captures an important part of the films' histories—their age and wear. For example,

few in the 1960s saw the original print of Luis Vale's film or any film from the Film Club. The wear on the celluloid actually offers us information about their usage. To digitize this version is to capture at least part of the history of the film and the archive. It is actually a move that challenges the "authentic," "original" version that preservation so often fetishizes and, I argue, leaves intact critical information about their history. It also offers a more economical practice. Financial constraints are a daily challenge for archives. By shifting away from costly and extensive restoration, we could digitize and offer access to more films at a lower cost.

Third, digitization and the ensuing access can be a critical practice for public humanities. More specifically, a digital archive of the Young Filmmakers Collection does justice to the films and their histories. These films were meant to keep moving across screens rather than sit still. They were intended to and did circulate through the communities in which they depicted. Young Filmmakers Distribution Center rented and sold films. Libraries such as NYPL purchased copies and lent them for individual and group viewings. Their reach extended through institutions like New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Film Board of Canada, and they became a staple of education conferences on the role of film in education. However, today, the films reside in closed, noncirculating collections, whether at institutions or in the hands of individuals. This issue is augmented by the fact that many of the filmmakers do not have access to their own work, whether the film or projectors to play them. Digitization allows for the films to circulate once again, including among the communities in which they were shot and produced.

Finally, let me return to Luis Vale and return to perhaps one of the most important impacts our archival practices have—its impact on people. Vale proudly stood at the podium. He introduced his film as his eyes started to appear glassy and his pauses increased. Visibly emotional, he shared the story behind his film and the importance of Film Club as the first step in a 40-year career in news broadcasting. Next, across the screen at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, a brand new 16 mm preservation print of *Life in New York* rolled, only a few days back from restoration at the lab. After the film, Vale's friends and family buzzed with excitement. Vale's son approached and shared his eagerness to show the film to the rest of his family and his friends. It was not only a testament to his father's creativity but a lens into his childhood and life on the Lower East Side, a history he was eager to share. I smiled and nodded, saying we need to host more showings but questioned my own optimism, for the film was returning to a noncirculating collection to sit on metal shelves. When it will circulate and flicker across the screen again remains unanswered.

Editor's Note

In Spring 2016, the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded a Digital Projects for the Public Grant for *Participatory Media*, an online project that

interactively engages with and presents participatory community media from the 1960s and 1970s. As a part of this project, several films from the Young Filmmakers Collection will be digitized and featured, including *Life in New York*. For more, visit participatorymediaproject.org.

Notes

1. I am drawing on the work of scholars like Jacques Derrida and John Hunter who remind us that this process is anything but natural. Archives are a powerful technology of memory and social relations. The “storehouses” of treasures, as Hunter calls them, are shaped by beliefs and power dynamics outside of their walls. Decisions are made about what should be remembered and what should be forgotten in turn producing their own set of social relations and beliefs. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). For more on the politics of film archives and their reliance on ideas of cultural heritage, see Caroline Frick, *Saving Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
2. Jenna Jones, *The Past Is a Moving Picture* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2012).
3. For work on Puerto Rican representation, see Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and US Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). The work on black representation is extensive. Selected works include Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001); Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Phyllis R. Klotman and Janet K. Cutler, *Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Paula Massood, *Black City Cinema* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); Christopher Sieving, *Soul Searching: Black-Themed Cinema from the March on Washington to the Rise of Blaxploitation* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011).
4. In particular, I am drawing from the work of Brian Distelberg who argues that to be visible and fairly represented was a necessary step toward inclusion and national belonging in the 20th century. Brian Joseph Distelberg, “Visibility Matters: The Pursuit of American Belonging in an Age of Moving Images” (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2015).
5. See Young Filmmakers Foundation Distribution Pamphlet. Courtesy Elena Rossi-Snook (Figure 1) and NYPL’s (partial) catalog at <http://catalog.nypl.org/record=b17381982~S1>.
6. A Steenbeck is a brand name as well as an entire class of film editing machines and rollers for use with 16 mm and 35 mm film.
7. Luis Vale, Interview conducted by Elena Rossi-Snook and Lauren Tilton, August 19, 2014.
8. For a partial list of films, visit NYPL’s catalog at <http://catalog.nypl.org/record=b17381982~S1>. The collection is still being processed. A special thank you to Elena Rossi-Snook who generously granted me access to this incredible collection.
9. Luis Vale, *Life in New York*, 1971.
10. For more on the impact of heroin, see Eric Schneider, *Smack: Heroin and the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).
11. Luis Vale, Interview conducted by Elena Rossi-Snook and Lauren Tilton, August 19, 2014.
12. Caroline Frick, *Saving Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 22.
13. Dan Streible, “The State of Orphan Films: Editor’s Introduction.” *The Moving Image* 9: no. 1 (Spring 2009): vi–xix. It is worth noting that orphan moving images are also a legal issue. Streible states that “there is the legal problem of an orphaned reel as encountered in archival practice: a film whose rights holder/s (if they exist) have abandoned its care, or are unaware of

the legal claim they have on it. Archives have sought the right to take proper care of such items without having to worry about legal trouble should an owner later appear. U.S. copyright law has reckoned with the phenomenon of 'orphan works' in recent years, and the creative, legal, and archival communities continue to seek practical and legislative reforms that will allow these works to be preserved and used. The annual conference Orphans 6 included a panel on these issues." Accordingly, some archives have chosen to keep materials archived out of sight. See also Dan Streible, "The Role of Orphan Films in the 21st Century Archive." *Cinema Journal* 46: no. 3 (Spring 2007): 124–128.

14. Frick, *Saving Cinema*.
15. Dave McNary, "Martin Scorsese Backs Kodak Film Stock Production." *Variety*, August 4, 2014, <http://variety.com/2014/film/news/martin-scorsese-backs-kodak-on-film-stock-production-1201274982/>.
16. In particular, I am speaking to the concern that digitization will mean removing the physical copies that Paolo Cherchi Usai highlights in "Are All (Analog) Film Orphans?" *The Moving Image* 9: no. 1 (Spring 2009): 1–18.
17. See the "Code of Ethics." International Federation of Film Archives, <http://www.fiafnet.org/uk/members/ethics.html>.

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