

**A Preface with Promise: revisiting *Film Curatorship:*  
*Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace***

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**A Preface with Promise: revisiting *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace* (Österreichisches Filmmuseum, 2020 [2008])**

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When *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace* co-written and co-edited by Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Francis, Alexander Horwath and Michael Loebenstein first came out in 2008, the future of the film medium in the face of a digital revolution was at the centre of the discourse. If film is a material form with an indexical link to the “real” world, how does the increased dependence on digital forms of recording, storage, and viewing, impact its existence? Crucially, what are film archives preserving if spaces such as YouTube could store an endless amount of media content, more aligned with the contemporary audiences’ moving image practices? Today, these debates have (somewhat tentatively) been negotiated with archives using the strategy of extensive (albeit still selective) digitisation often accompanied by pertinent contextualisation in a society much more digitally dependent than when this book was first written.<sup>1</sup> As noted in the updated preface to the book’s second edition, “the hegemony of the non-photochemical moving images is now firmly established” (5). Indeed, the necessity to digitise and organise content was only given further impetus by the ongoing pandemic. This second edition’s new one-page preface from its editors offers an insight into the relationship between film archives and the contemporary digital landscape.

Their concerns centre on two aspects of media use: public consumption of the media, and the threats to the freedom of that consumption, depending on who controls the exhibition space. The editors understand this “public consumption” based on three interconnected phenomena: the commodification of film festivals, the influence of the corporate world in this sphere, and the fetishisation of the “allegedly out-dated” collective theatrical experience of film viewing;

the adjective “archival” being employed to refer “to the dissemination of all cinema from the past”; and the idea that “restoration” means creating any facsimile of a photochemical film, “in so far as its producer – be it an entrepreneur, a copyright owner, or a collecting institution – presents it as such” (5). This pithy preface gives an insight into the editors’ belief that there is more to film archiving than facilitating exhibition of media. Simultaneously, “consumption” itself must be understood more as an active interaction with images and their history than as following a pre-selected order supplied by an institution or a corporation.

This brings out the idea of a “civil disobedience” via curation – a willingness to revolt against external impositions and regulations on viewing practices (ibid). The editors recognise that the focus on consumption, as currently understood, is an imposition. The ostensible promise of the digital archive and its infinite storage capacity obscures the presence of those who ideologically structure these images. This is something that Lennaart van Oldenborgh, Lauren S. Berliner, Claire Henry, and Eleni Palis discuss in this issue, while many of the other contributors such as María A. Vélez-Serna, Lola Rémy, May Chew, and Guilia Rho foreground artistic challenges to the hegemonic curations. Essentially, in this digital landscape, the right to curate – and therefore the right to free access of images – is the right to free speech. *Film Curatorship*’s writers and the contributors to this issue all take up the cause.

That the words of these thoughtful and prescient archivists have resonances in an issue dedicated to archives in the digital age is no surprise. However, what is perhaps most telling is slight softening of the position of the archivists themselves. When the book was first published, the scholar and archivist Jan-Christopher Horak among others noted their conservatism (albeit to varying degree) identifying that “[l]ike other cultural conservatives, the authors see the decline in cinephilia as a general cultural malaise” of the digital age.<sup>2</sup> This is perhaps most evident in Cherchi Usai’s “Charter of Curatorial Values” from the original text. Even while

maintaining “permanent accessibility” as the “ultimate goal” of “the acquisition and preservation process”, he states that the institutional curator is the “arbiter of balance” between acquisition, preservation, and access (151-152). In other words, some level of regulation (even at the cost of access) was part of the curator’s work.

While many of the values enshrined in the rest of the book are still rightly upheld by its editors, this new preface hints that curation is seen most importantly as a means of resistance now, with few qualifying statements. There is something tragic as well as liberating to this. Their shift in position highlights the instability inherent in the contemporary curatorial role. The landscape has changed so drastically over the last decade that ideas of yesterday may be incredibly difficult to implement today. Simultaneously, there is an acceptance that archival curation now is a cultural battleground; all efforts to open up access and interpretations of the moving image are invaluable. The book was always a conversation between practitioners rather than a didactic primer. However, this new preface indicates that it should now be read as the first step in a long-term debate about the democratisation of media. Much as in Stephen Broomer’s video essay in this issue, the visual artist emerges as a point of continuity between analogue and digital remixing, these editors/writers/archivists seek to pass on a concern for archival heritage more than the definite methods to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> On contemporary curatorial strategies employed by archivists see Dagmar Brunow, “Curating Access to Audiovisual Heritage: Cultural Memory and Diversity in European Film Archives,” *Image & Narrative* 18.1 (2017), 97–110

<sup>2</sup> Jan-Christopher Horak, “Book Review: *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace* edited” in *Senses of Cinema* 55 (2010).