

A Look Back

The Professional Master's Program in Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image and How It Came to Amsterdam

Thomas Elsaesser

Editors' Note

Thomas Elsaesser, Professor Emeritus in Media and Culture at the University of Amsterdam (UvA), founded the university's professional MA Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image (P&P) in 2003. For its fifth anniversary in November 2008, Dr Julia Noordegraaf, then director of the program, invited Professor Elsaesser to welcome new students enrolled in the MA. In his speech "A Look Back: The Professional Master's Program in Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image" and How It Came to Amsterdam," Professor Elsaesser offered some reflections on the institutional, political, and personal implications of founding the P&P program, which are still relevant today. Professor Elsaesser kindly agreed to let us publish the manuscript with minor alterations. We have added bibliographical information for cited sources and updated names of mentioned institutions. Moreover, we used Professor Elsaesser's notes to briefly outline the speech's two main thematic threads.

In the first part of the manuscript, Professor Elsaesser provides a detailed account of the intricate institutional and political implications of creating a program for moving image preservation. On the one hand, he recalls how the founding of the P&P program developed out of the institutionalisation of early cinema studies and the increased exchange between film scholars and archives in the 1970s and 1980s. On the other hand, he details how the numerous efforts to build on the European Union's MEDIA programs have impacted the structure of P&P and its relation to European university politics and local funding schemes. In the second part, Professor Elsaesser highlights his person-

al motivations behind his efforts in teaching the archival life of film. He explains how screenings from the Jean Desmet Collection at Le Giornate del Cinema Muto in the 1980s and Dutch found footage works in the early 1990s provided the productive theoretical coordinates for a curriculum that would combine theoretical as well as practical training.

The Amsterdam Professional Master's Program in 'Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image' – A Retrospective

My thanks for inviting me to speak here today: I take this opportunity to welcome the students of P&P to Amsterdam but also our new colleague, Alexandra Schneider. Having been asked to say something about how the idea and then the realization of the "MA Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image" came about, I think I can point to at least five different reasons or histories: three are institutional histories and two are more personal ones. But as each year's intake of new P&P students—and their subsequent careers—amply proves, there are many more paths that lead to P&P and especially, from P&P into the world of archiving, programming, conservation and cultural heritage, few of which I could have imagined or anticipated in those early days.

The first path goes back to the crisis affecting film archives in the 1970s and 1980s, when nitrate came to the end of its natural life, and for the first time, film archives actively sought the help from film his-

torians and film scholars, symbolized by the FIAF/Brighton meeting in 1978, which in my case, led to teaching courses at the University of East Anglia on early cinema and pre-cinema from the 1980s onwards, as well as media archaeology in Amsterdam in the 1990s and beyond, while also editing the collection *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* for the British Film Institute in 1990. I won't detail this history, because you will have learnt about it in your courses: it is one of the foundations of our field, and has been most recently recapitulated in Wanda Strauven's *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (2006).

But it might just be worth adding to this my first experience in archiving: the idea of advanced study in the field of Film Preservation, joined to an academic Master's degree in Film Studies goes back to 1985, when, as director of an MA Program in Film Studies at the University of East Anglia, I became involved in setting up an MA degree in Film and Television Archiving, proposed and coordinated by David Cleveland, the director of a small, but significant regional archive, the East Anglia Film Archive.

This MA in Film Archiving started with students, who, in addition to their practical courses, took a combination of modularised units from the regular Film Studies MA program. One was the already mentioned course on 'Early Cinema,' taught by Charles Barr and myself. The archive courses were practical, rather than academic, using the East Anglia Film Archive resources, which at the time consisted mainly of the holdings and the equipment that David Cleveland had acquired and preserved over the previous decade, as a researcher at Anglia Television, as a public lecturer and, I believe, also as a private collector.

The second institutional history behind P&P was the setting up of Archimedia in the mid-1990s, a more formalized cooperation, supported by the MEDIA program of the European Union, between film archives and university film departments. Archimedia, thus, became the European network of archives and universities, initiated by Gabrielle Claes in Bruxelles and Philippe Dubois at Paris III, for the promotion and training of young professionals in the archiving and preservation sector. The work within Archimedia, the committee meetings and, even more so, the teaching and workshop sessions organised for the *formation initiale* and the *formation professionnelle* was the most

decisive reason why in 2000, after MEDIA ceased funding this very inspiring co-operation between the archives and the universities, I decided to go ahead at the University of Amsterdam with implementing at least part of the program we had been discussing in our various meetings in Brussels, Liege, Bologna, Amsterdam, Paris, Madrid and Lisbon.

In fact, it was at one of the last meetings of the original group in Lisbon that together with my Italian colleague Leonardo Quaresima from Bologna and Udine we were asked to make specific proposals for a European MA in Archiving, to compete with—or to complement—the programs that were at the same time being set up in the US—at the University of California, Los Angeles, headed by Steve Ricci; at New York University, directed by Howard Besser and now by Dan Streible; at the G. Eastman House, Rochester where Paolo Cherchi Usai had begun a certificate program, continued by Chris Horak, now called The L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation at George Eastman House.

Some of these contacts have remained, such as with NYU (thanks to Dan Streible, and the highly acclaimed annual 'Orphans of Cinema' conferences-cum-festivals), but most actively with Leonardo Quaresima, who was successful in obtaining funds for a European spring school, the 'Gradisca Spring School' (for the first time held in March 2003, the same year as P&P started, and both are still going strong). The 'Gradisca Spring School' and P&P are thus cousins, if not sisters—since both devote themselves to issues of film history from an archival and film restoration perspective. But we also started talks with NYU, with whose Tisch School of the Arts the University of Amsterdam cinema department already has extensive contacts (student and faculty exchanges, joint graduate student conferences, joint supervision of PhDs, joint research and publication projects).

Subsequently, I used the Amsterdam–NYU connection to forge ahead with the idea of a joint MA, now international, rather than European, financially supported by the then Vice-Chancellor, Sijbold Noorda, who invited me to pursue a "centres of excellence" initiative between UvA, NYU, Free University Berlin, and University College London. After auspicious beginnings, the bureaucratic hurdles proved too high and it, too, did not lead to a viable MA program, however hard we tried, but it

did lead to three consecutive graduate student conferences with participants from Amsterdam, New York and London and a publication—*Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory* (2005).

This is perhaps where a more personal rather than institutional narrative should be mentioned—namely what made me leave Britain and the University of East Anglia, and brought me to Amsterdam. One of the most successful and visible results of the Brighton-FIAF alliance was the film festival ‘Giornate del cinema muto’ in Pordenone, founded in 1982, and also still going. For many years I was a regular visitor, attending from the second meeting onwards. There I came into contact with Karel Dibbets, from UvA, and that is where for first time I heard about the Nederlands Filmmuseum and its extraordinary Desmet collection of Early Cinema material. When the University approached me in 1990, to ask whether I wanted to help them start a Film Department in Amsterdam, it was the Desmet collection and its yet to be fully explored riches which had a lot to do with eventually swaying my decision.

Many of the courses we set up in the regular Film Studies program made use of the facilities of the Nederlands Filmmuseum, in the first instance as a screening venue for 35mm films, and as an extensive book-library with valuable periodical holdings (the University was only gradually acquiring film books as the department expanded). But the Filmmuseum also proved to be an accessible film library for the study of the cinema because of its early adoption of a then not uncontroversial policy: to make video copies from the collection available for viewing to students and scholars. The 1990s were the years when the Nederlands Filmmuseum was scoring some notable successes internationally, first at the ‘Giornate del cinema muto,’ and then at other early or silent cinema festivals all over the world.

The increased use that international scholars were making of the archive also helped the direction to secure substantial grants from the Dutch Ministry of Culture, which in turn allowed the Filmmuseum to work closely with a specialized laboratory, Haghefilm, and to organize international workshops on color, sound, non-fiction material, colonial film, etc.

These contacts with the Filmmuseum and the experience with the students and teachers on the International MA (which was started in 1992, one

year after we opened the Department) made me realize that Amsterdam could boast of a unique combination of cultural institutions in the field of cinema, and not simply in the area of archiving. For Amsterdam, besides being a major European tourist destination, also has an extensive festival and museum culture. It is home to the ‘International Documentary Festival’ (IDFA), ‘MonteVideo - Time Based Art’ (since 2012 LIMA), the ‘World Wide Video Festival,’ ‘KLIK! Animation Festival,’ ‘Cinekid,’ and the ‘Africa in the Picture’ festival. In addition, Amsterdam University has in its vicinity the ‘International Rotterdam Film Festival,’ and last but not least, there is the National Television Archive Beeld & Geluid in Hilversum, now one of P&P’s most important and loyal partners.

In short, throughout the 1990s, the idea grew to offer (fee-paying) foreign students of the International MA a more practical option alongside the academic one, maximizing the location advantage of Amsterdam, at the same time as enhancing the attractiveness of the Master’s Degree generally, since it had not gone unnoticed that there was indeed a gap in the market for an institution able to providing educational opportunities at the advanced level to students in the field of cinema who did not wish to continue with a PhD or a university career.

This brings me to the last of my institutional contexts for the MA P&P, the so-called Bologna Declaration, obliging universities within the European Union to coordinate and synchronize their respective higher education degree courses, their course credits, their diplomas and certificates, and to adopt a compatible structure of Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees, in view of facilitating cross-border student mobility and supporting the recognition and convertibility of academic grades within the EU.

The Bologna Declaration was implemented in the Netherlands with astonishing enthusiasm and at great speed. In the process, it created unexpected opportunities for innovation. For instance, while the Dutch government was reluctant to make “new money” available to the universities for setting up traditional Master’s courses, the Ministry of Education did allocate special seed-funds for Master’s courses which promised to make academic skills relevant to professional practice, or which offered students and professionals the option of continued education, i.e. returning to universities for shorter periods (up to one year), in order to update their skills, acquire new ones, or acquaint themselves with

theoretical developments in their respective fields. This directive allowed us in the Film and Television Studies department, renamed Department of Media and Culture (which now includes, besides film, television, and digital media also journalism, archive, and information studies) to develop three such Professional MA courses (the other two are in cultural journalism, and in television research).

I finally saw my chance to implement my long-held dream of a new MA program, with a professional and training element: it as a unique opportunity to bring P&P into being, and I was staunchly supported first by my former student turned assistant Tamara de Rijk, and when it became a reality, by the appointment of Julia Noordegraaf, an art historian with a passion for cinema, cultural heritage, and archival work.

If these were some of the external factors leading to the P&P program, the main philosophy behind the course is indicated in its title: the Master's Degree regards the archiving, cataloguing, and conservation part—what we call 'preservation'—as integrally linked to the programming, exhibition, and display part—what we call 'presentation'. This may have seemed over-ambitious and contentious, given the little time the student has, but it imposed itself not only for pragmatic reasons. It represents a deeply held conviction among those responsible for the program: namely that the "life of films" is inseparable from "films live." What does this mean? The physical conservation of films, by which is meant the detailed types of knowledge that go with the specificity of the material supports of films (nitrate, acetate, polyester celluloid-based, as well as digital carriers) necessarily supports the life of films, made up of the material conditions of their survival as texts, objects, artifacts, as cultural memory and even forensic evidence. And this "life" is inseparable from "films live," the living context of keeping the experience of films, and the values that our film heritage embodies, alive for each new generation. This "keeping films live" is especially important in the face of—and in open dialogue with—the many delivery systems (DVDs, streaming video) and platforms (monitors, laptops, and smartphones) that have become available for viewing films. But it also affects the very different uses that our audio-visual heritage is being put to, in the museum space, on television and in the home.

This "keeping alive" requires renewed reflection of what a "live" performance of a film once was:

knowledge about the musical accompaniment for silent films; the technical apparatus of projecting sound film or the equipment needed for wide-screen and 3-D, for instance; cinema architecture and other spaces used for public viewing and projection; how a feature film was programmed along with other filmic material, such as newsreels or shorts; the commissioning institutions of non-fiction films and the different and the contexts of their reception, including industrial films, advertising films, training films: what came to be called "Films that Work." Besides this properly historical, possibly antiquarian aspect of "keeping films alive," another important aspect are the different efforts undertaken of how films can be brought "back to life" for generations, whose viewing habits are shaped by television and the digital media, by different music cultures and sound-spaces, and whose primary experiences of moving images takes place in locations and environments other than the traditional cinema: screenings of "silents" with live music, and open air theatres or town squares have attracted a new public, but also posed challenges for archivists: the annual meetings of 'Il Cinema ritrovato' organized by the Cinematheque of Bologna has been a pioneer in this respect.

Calling the MA program 'Preservation and Presentation' was also an intervention in an old debate among cinematheques, whose directors were often split between seemingly incompatible alternatives. I am referring to the classical (and by now quasi-mythical) divide among the first generation of film archivists—between a Henry Langlois (Cinematheque française, Paris) faction, whose motto was "showing is preserving," and a Ernest Lindgren (BFI London) school: "preservation must have priority over showing." We wanted to bridge the divide, not by disavowing it, and instead by problematizing once more the questions standing behind their respective choices: preserve what, how, for whom, and in view of what criteria of selection and prioritization. These issues are as relevant today as they were in the 1940s and 1950s, during FIAF's formative years, even if digital technologies now offer a vastly more extensive toolbox for coming up with creative solutions. Having myself been converted from the sectarian faith of Hollywood auteurism and the polemics of French *cinéphilie* to the Broad Church of early cinema and the non-hierarchised inclusiveness of archival collections, through the annual festivals in Pordenone ("Giornate del cinema muto") and Bol-

ogna (*Il Cinema ritrovato*), it has become a matter of conviction that preservation and presentation are two sides of the same coin, when it comes to taking care of our audiovisual heritage and of acknowledging the cinema's ever-increasing importance in shaping cultural memory during the past hundred years. How does P&P offer not just a solid academic background, but also courses that meet the particular situations and dilemmas of the archives? As we know, a commitment to preservation and presentation is for the archives only the beginning of the problem: do they concentrate on the masterpieces and consolidate the processes of canonisation? Do they follow with their screenings and retrospectives topical issues in society at large, and service the needs of the cultural calendar of events and anniversaries? How can they best promote knowledge of and display what is usually the larger parts of their holdings, namely the average output of commercial film production, which, in some countries, may have little direct connection with the national patrimony? How can they valorise their incidental fragments, the non-fiction holdings, the "bits and pieces," which have been ennobled (or sentimentalized?) by being called the "orphans" of the cinema? If labelling everything that has survived "culturally valuable" and part of the national "patrimony" means drowning in the sheer quantity of material, how can an archive intervene in the cycle that affects all commodities, including those of popular culture - going from premium value when first released to commercial uselessness, via their non-status as junk, and then to a new life as cult-objects, as collectible and once more valuable "classics"? And how can such processes of cultural capital generation be adapted to the life cycles and value cycles of the commodity film? If a course in Film Theory at present does not recommend itself to the Archive for determining their criteria for selection and de-selection, there is no reason why there cannot be a film theory that sets out the terms of those aesthetic debates, those parameters of stylistic practice, and those historical conditions of discursive (re-)valorisation, on the strength of which archivists then make informed decisions about the presentation of their holdings?

It is here that I see a particular opportunity for a university-based course, as a site that analyses, debates and occasionally also launches new discourses, by adapting existing ones from within the field, or by initiating a dialogue with adjacent disciplines. For instance, what emerged in the Amsterdam context

was, on the one hand, an interest in media-archaeology and the relation between 1900 and 2000 as major transformational media epistemes (imagined futures) and, on the other hand, an intensified reflection, at a fairly advanced level of generality, about a new poetics of the fragment and the rhetoric of montage, about the status of the found object, and the aesthetics of repetition and seriality, of the migration of motifs and the transfer of tropes. Of course, this is nothing new: these topics have preoccupied the humanities for at least the last two decades, and within film history have led to seminars on "found footage" film, on the "essay film," on a new poetics, but also a new semio-pragmatics of, for instance, the factual film and the utilitarian film (for industrial use, training, advertising, instruction). While some film scholars working in this area have begun to rethink the practices also of the avant-garde, and have looked to museums and installation art for examples of such a poetics of montage and metaphor, the contacts with film archives have so far been less visible.

Filmmakers such as Peter Delpout (*Lyrical Nitrate*), Harun Farocki (*Leben BRD*), Peter Forgacs (*The Maestrom*) or Gustav Deutsch (*Film ist*) have shown what such collaboration between archives and artists can yield. Another more practical topic explored by the film studies community is a politically responsible and theoretically informed practice for providing scholarly expertise for educational, but also commercial DVDs. Problematic as a tool of preservation and maybe even research, the DVD and its "bonus" features has been a powerful communication tool and education resource, whose programming or "packaging" poses challenges to the archivist as well as to the film theorist. The DVD editions of the Filmmuseum—and to which our students have made significant contributions—are a clear indication of the value of such collaboration. Video essays, mash-ups and super cuts are the natural extension, whose archival and pedagogical value are increasingly recognized.

We can therefore be confident that P&P and the Amsterdam model are not just ambitious, but far-sighted and on the right track—in many of its different directions. By bringing together a well-established university and prestigious media archives, the MA has shown the way: how to maximise the advantages that come from being located in a city that may be at the periphery of continental Europe, but that is—in culture, education, transport and com-

merce—a “hub” not least because linguistically, it is comfortably Anglophone. As a well-known European heritage capital, an important tourist site, and a city that is home to some of the top museums in the world, Amsterdam occupies also a strategic position with regards to media and culture. Its festival circuit throughout the year is in many ways typical of wider trends in city management and branding, reflecting the insight that economic well-being and future developments in the urban knowledge economy depend on a blend of heritage and high-tech, of tourism and internationally competitive institutions of higher education.

At the same time, the MA course paradoxically benefits from the city’s geographical ex-centricity, even its regionalism and marginality, when compared to, say, London and Paris. Archives of such capital cities tend to “represent” their respective film cultures in the image of the “nation” and thus define the national patrimony in canonical terms, e.g. as manifest in the priority given to restoration projects of the masterpieces and classics of French cinema and Paris, and of German cinema by the Munich Film-museum in the 1980s and in Berlin since German unification. A “small” country and its film archive can, by contrast, afford to be more international and transnational, promoting an especially diverse cultural preservation and presentation policy. In Amsterdam, this diversity is emblematically embodied in the core of the holdings, the Jean Desmet collection. Originating from the distribution and exhibition practice of a cinema owner from the 1910s, its holdings—mostly films from Denmark, the USA, Germany, France and Italy, then the world’s chief filmmaking nations—challenge the Filmmuseum to be innovative and unconventional above all in the presentation of this material, for which it cannot rely on previously established criteria of valorization, nor can it concentrate on “national” criteria. This in turn gives the students the opportunity to contribute actively to the discussions around both the national-international role and the preservation criteria of the Amsterdam archive, redefining itself between a repository of international film production, a film museum open to the general public, and a service provider for a specialised educational community.

This last point, perhaps, also highlights another paradox, that of a-symmetrical value generation: the images and artifacts of the audiovisual heritage are exceptionally fragile, perishable and even materially

unstable. They need substantial resources for their conservation and restoration, for the most part provided by the shrinking budgets of state and local authorities. At the same time, the demand for pristine, well-kept and perfectly preserved moving images of “the past” continues to increase, led by the insatiable appetite of television, but also fed by the advertising and design industries. As such, moving images increasingly represent commercially valuable assets. How to bridge this gap between the social cost of keeping these images alive, and the commercial benefits that can be drawn from them? Should archives be asked to finance themselves and their work by monetizing these assets commercially, possibly at the expense of the archives’ cultural function and institutional autonomy? If they price their work competitively, do they not price themselves out of other ‘markets’, such as that of education, as well as risk redefining what is heritage and patrimony in direct proportion to their clients’ interests and agendas? Perhaps it is here that the new alliance that has been struck between the archives and the universities will, in the long run, bear fruit—fruit as important as that of training a new generation of professionals: to maintain an independence of inquiry and openness of debate that makes “preservation and presentation” not just the service provider of the experience economy, but also its conscience and critical reflection? The cinema deserves no less, if it is indeed part of the cultural heritage and has a rightful place in a university curriculum.

I’m almost at the end of what I wanted to say. The second personal history which brought me to wanting to create an academic program on archiving and programming had to do with a film I happened to see on Dutch television in 1994, a documentary by Cherry Duyns, called *Settela, gezicht van het verleden* (1994). For me it is the story of a single image, and its strange history, which after I had researched it, gave me subsequently a whole new insight into the meaning of ‘found footage’ and the belief that we should be studying more seriously and more closely the “life” of images, as well as images “live.” I have since written three essays about this image—one, called “One Train May be Hiding Another” can be accessed on the web. As for further thoughts on these and related matters, from myself and my Amsterdam colleagues, the bibliography provides some guidance.

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