

What Price Professionalism?

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When I was asked to respond to Ray Edmondson's piece, "Is Film Archiving a Profession Yet? A Reflection – Twenty Years On," I was immediately struck by the clever title of the *Synoptique* issue in which it would be published: "Institutionalizing Moving Image Archival Training" (emphasis mine). In the two decades since Edmondson's original essay, moving image archival training has, indeed, become institutionalized in every sense of the word. Training has not only become formal "education," but is increasingly academic, ensconced in ivory tower institutions. Moreover, the efforts on the part of film or audiovisual archiving professionals to establish codes of ethics and to "profess commitment to competence, integrity and morality, altruism," as Edmondson notes has already occurred in the International Federation of Film Archive (FIAF), Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA), and the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA) amongst others, connotes more institutionalization. In this case, attempting to clarify and standardize professional expectations and protocols.

To be "institutionalized" can also conjure up, appropriately, old Hollywood images of the eerie "asylum" where one sends the suffering, highly impassioned, or disaffected. Having attended countless moving image archival conferences in the last twenty years, I think it a fair analogy for this profession's *mélange* of individuals proudly follo-

wing in what some might say, the unique footsteps of Iris Barry and Henri Langlois. (*Please note:* I write this with great affection and fully cognizant of my own self-identification as "film archivist!"). Issues of identity, professional or not, the increased distancing of the profession of moving image archivists from the media industries themselves, and the ever-present challenges of financial remuneration and constraint appear to me to be the most significant and resonant to the contemporary landscape of archival training and the field writ-large.

Edmondson's discussion of the socio-cultural aspects of professional identity offers one of the most compelling aspects of his essay. As he notes, his original article's debate as to whether or not film archiving was a profession "did not automatically mean that people working in the field personally *identified* as film archivists...many preferred to identify with the professions in which they happened to hold formal qualifications." How one self-identifies, or what aspect of one's identity to privilege over another, proves a core component to the creation, cultivation, and, indeed, definition of a profession. Underpinning the status and respect conferred upon a "professional," regardless of specific field, is the clear demarcation of the profession from jobs dependent upon manual labor.

In a chapter that I wrote for an anthology on media industry studies (Frick 2009), I noted an interesting analogy between film archivists, tasked with taking

care of “dead” or obsolete media artifacts, and early American morticians. In the nineteenth century, undertakers distanced themselves from woodworking laborers who crafted coffins by beginning to refer to themselves first as “funeral directors.”

In a country where there is no titled class... the chief distinction which popular sentiment can lay hold of as raising one set of persons above another is the character of their occupation... Success in the middle class increasingly depended upon... elevating the status of one's occupation by referring to it as a profession. Funeral directors, for instance, seized the word—professional—when they decided not to follow in ‘the wake of broom makers, box and basket-makers’ (36).

The growth of academic or professional degree programs in film or media archiving testifies to the personal and socio-cultural value of attaining certification via study and research versus, or in addition to, skills attained via experience or vocational training. Social networking predicated on these degree programs then grow to carry significant weight and import in the job market as well.

Of course, concomitant with the rise of academic courses in audiovisual preservation was the global shift to digital communication, information, and convergence. Up until that time, celluloid, both 35mm and 16mm, retained a vital, central role binding together moving image archives, film and broadcasting entities, motion picture laboratories, and growing ranks of preservation professionals. With the first generation of film archivists trained in programs joined to more established film and media studies departments, or in the case of George Eastman Museum's L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation, a museum dedicated to the preservation of film as art and artifact, celluloid not only was taught to be the preservation medium but had, for many, acquired an almost fetish-like aura.

For example, when I arrived at George Eastman Museum (then House) in 2010 to serve as the Curator of Motion Pictures, I discovered that films from the collection had not been used in conjunction with other museum department content in the creation and displays of museum exhibitions, as the films would be seen on video within such an environment. Rather, the appropriate (and only)

manner for the general public to experience films from the collection would be via projection in the museum cinema on celluloid, in accordance with the film's original intent and form. I can, both then and now, appreciate this rarified “celluloid-first” approach, particularly from a theoretical, branding and/or aesthetic perspective.

My concern remains, however, that such an adherence to celluloid “purity” ultimately reduces the number of people who can or will engage with archival content and, quite frankly, can take some of the pure enjoyment and fun out of the virtually endless potential of film or media curation. Although this anecdote offers only a small example of how organizations that conceive of, or present, film primarily as an art form have dealt with celluloid, the explosion of academic and archiving interest in non-feature film material (aka, “orphans” not “ART”) led to an entirely new area of celluloid-focused discussion and study that, at first, privileged film as film.

At the same, broadcasting entities were busily moving forward into digital production, post-, and preservation just as they had done with video (film preservationists, and their growing ranks of professionals, remained largely devoted to film). While in the 1990s, representatives from major broadcasting entities as well as production houses would attend the Association of Moving Image Archivists conference, more recent events outside of Los Angeles or New York garner very few of the now-dominant media format and industry.

Although a much larger topic that is far too complicated for thorough discussion here, I would posit that the increased separation between audiovisual archiving professionals and the commercial entities producing moving image product has had a deleterious effect—and is one that is inextricably connected to the “death of cinema,” not as an art form or as broadcasting fodder, but as an industry standard. Digital preservationists, much like twentieth century audiovisual preservationists have started to create their own organizations and interest groups, widening rather worrisome gaps between emerging professionals. Will this even matter, however, in our era of convergence, where “archives” are becoming synonymous with digital asset management, and information technology officers work with audiovisual collections more than “trained professionals?”

Another vital challenge inherent to the increased

professionalization of the media preservation field (and concomitant growth and value of educational programs) remains financial. Not only has the cost for preserving audiovisual content continued to rise, but so has the cost of becoming a preservation professional. One of the most prolific, and understandable, complaints by graduates from the increasingly expensive academic or professional degree granting programs in film and/or moving image archiving is the lack of job security upon graduation as well as the low pay associated with employment in the field. Nearly every year, the AMIA-list serv experiences a flurry of activity directly related to this topic. For example, in 2010, a long and quite heated exchange took place about “The Cost of Archiving” (AMIA 2010) that grew to include provocative but very important questions: “It is fair to look at the cost of AV Archivists not only from the Archivist perspective (too much training for too little salary) but from the management perspective...it is important to consider what value an AV Archivist really does bring to the table in a digital archive and at what cost...are AV Archivists necessary and if so at what cost?” Edmondson himself notes towards the conclusion of his essay that he reminds students that media archiving is “a field without financial rewards” but that new generations of film archivists share the “passion” of their more senior colleagues.

I agree with Edmondson’s assessment of the financial limitations of the field as well as of the awe-inspiring level of commitment and excitement possessed by individuals in the film preservation communities. At the same time, I would argue that the “selfless” or self-sacrificing nature of media archiving professionals fits seamlessly with the notion of middle-class professionalization in its most general sense: One pursues work due to a higher calling that can be framed in almost quasi-religious discourse. (Or, in other words, film archivists are doing this work for the money!) I do not cite such passion, fervor, or zeal in any negative sense; indeed, I share this level of excitement when describing new archival discoveries carefully (and painfully) pulled from a dusty and moldy 8mm box. Rather, I refer to this passion as an indicator of the class-imbued nature of professionalization generally and media preservationists’ mid-to late twentieth century pursuit of this qualification.

Jobs within the moving image archiving community increasingly mirror paper or art conservation in requiring an advanced degree from institutions

of higher learning. Thus, the move towards professionalization for media archivists has succeeded in effectively distancing trained practitioners from mere amateurs, fans or hobbyists. Film curators, for example, now must possess PhDs to illustrate academic pedigree, not just simply know film facts and trivia from having collected films, like the early generation of Langlois, James Card, and others. But will the costs associated with such programs serve to inhibit greater diversity of accredited professionals? Will only the upper middle and elite echelons of our world be able to afford to be media archivists? Or will digital convergence carry with it the ability to challenge previous nineteenth and twentieth century conceptions of what constitutes a “professional?” Perhaps a new mode of professionalism can emerge that remains publicly accountable, but with less stringent or moralistic conceptions of right and wrong, good or bad, or, at the very least, less monopolistic. In other words, professionalism can serve as a “method of controlling work” and, relatedly, who can work and how (Friedson 1994, 3).

I tend to agree with Edmondson that audiovisual archiving has evolved into a profession as of 2017, but I would encourage those involved and invested in said profession to look closely and carefully at what has been lost with this transition. Who is able to define themselves as a film archivist, and why? Film, media, sound, or digital archiving should not be institutionalized, but rather must continue to evolve and migrate as our content itself does.

References

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