Introduction

My task which I am trying to achieve is... before all, to make you see.

When Joseph Conrad wrote these words in 1897, motion pictures were barely four years old, and film culture—the projection of those motion pictures onto a screen before an audience—less than two.

During those earliest years, filmmakers aspired to do little more than document the physical world around them and reproduce popular entertainments from live theater. Their goal was to create an audience where none had existed before, to entertain the masses in such a way as to make the novelty of motion pictures an integral part of the world’s precious leisure hours.

Within two decades of their initial efforts, the new film moguls had succeeded beyond such modest aims. Audiences throughout North America and Europe filled movie theaters every day, amusing themselves with a steady diet of melodramas, comedies, newsreels, and animation, and the rest of the world would soon follow. Virtually overnight, film studios appeared in cities around the world to meet audience demand, and what was at first a curious offshoot of vaudeville soon became a thriving industry in its own right. With success came notoriety and the attention of political and social elites, who began to weigh in on both the benefits and dangers of motion pictures as well as on their place in the wider cultural landscape. Soon a small but increasingly vocal number of filmmakers and critics were beginning to speak of film not simply as a means for entertaining the masses but as a new art form in its own right.

Although Conrad was writing about literature, his description of an artist as one who creates so that others might experience and understand what previously has been hidden or unknown was one that appealed to the ambitions of early filmmakers. Whether they did so out of aesthetic conviction or as a way to expand and deepen their economic and cultural stake in their communities, early film producers, directors, writers, and actors in Europe and America identified themselves increasingly not as mere showmen and entertainers but as artists.

Authors such as Vachel Lindsay and Hugo Munsterberg published books that supported this view, both making serious claims for film as a new and distinctively modern art, one that reflected the industrial and entrepreneurial society from which it arose. A popular art, one of the “seven lively arts,” as Gilbert Seldes would write in 1924, but an art nonetheless.

By then, some individuals were taking up the banner of film as an art form with possibilities beyond narrative. Visual artists in Europe turned to theories of assemblage and montage to create abstract and nonnarrative films, works that would challenge audiences and critics alike to look at the motion picture as a natural outgrowth of painting and photography. Still other artists would take these same ideas and reapply them to narrative, thus closing the circle by demonstrating that montage and assemblage were tools that could be used in the service of traditional storytelling.

Conrad’s self-described mission is one that might be readily expressed by any artist—or, for that matter, any curator. For those of us who work in museums, the goal is to acquire, care for, and present art so that others will not simply look at it (although there is value in that) but see it in a deeper, wider way.

Acquisition

In 1932 Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the Museum’s founding director, stressed the importance of introducing film, “the only great art form peculiar to the twentieth century,” to “the American public which should appreciate good films and support them.” Barr understood, before most others, that motion pictures belonged in a museum of modern art, that the simple fact of their emergence from the cultural ferment of the modern age gave them a place in such an institution. In 1935 he hired English film critic Iris Barry to be the first curator of the Museum’s new Film Library, and John E. Abbott as its first director. Museum Trustee John Hay “Jock” Whitney—who, in addition to collecting
modern painting, produced films in partnership with David O. Selznick—was chosen as the first chairman of the Film Library, a position he held from 1935 to 1951.

Then, as now, most films were controlled by large corporate interests, and so Whitney and Barr understood that the Museum's collection could only be assembled in cooperation with those who made the movies. Whitney sent Barry and Abbott to Hollywood to persuade industry leaders to donate prints, a radical concept that startled stars and producers alike. At a reception and screening at the Pickfair mansion in August 1935, attended by such industry power brokers as Harry Cohn, Merian C. Cooper, Samuel Goldwyn, Harry Warner, Jesse Lasky, Walter Wanger, and Walt Disney, Barry illustrated film's brief but important history with a short program of film clips, demonstrated the fragility of the medium, and argued the need to safeguard it. Soon afterward, donations of prints arrived in New York from Warner Bros., Paramount, Twentieth Century–Fox, Samuel Goldwyn, Harold Lloyd, Walt Disney, William S. Hart, Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, and David O. Selznick, among others.

In 1936 Barry traveled to Europe and the Soviet Union to acquire international films and meet filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein. So successful was this initial collection that in 1937 the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences commended the Museum with an award “for its significant work in collecting films...and for the first time making available to the public the means of studying the historical and aesthetic development of the motion picture as one of the major arts.”

Together with the pioneering film archives located in London, Paris, and Berlin, the Museum established the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) in 1938 and hosted the organization's first congress in New York the following year. Now headquartered in Brussels, FIAF has grown to a membership of more than 135 noncommercial institutions worldwide. Members are required to uphold a code of ethics that articulates the field's highest professional standards, thus facilitating communication and cooperation among its far-flung members.

In 1939, the same year that Whitney and Selznick released *Gone with the Wind*, The Museum of Modern Art opened its permanent home on West Fifty-third Street in Manhattan and launched the first museum-based film-exhibition program in America. With prompting from Lillian Gish, D. W. Griffith was persuaded to deposit his films and papers at the Museum, enabling the first major retrospective of a film artist to be assembled. *D. W. Griffith: American Film Master* set the standard for the presentation and analysis of the masters of this new art form.

Today the permanent collection contains more than twenty thousand titles and ranks as the world's finest museum archives of international film, video, and media art. Works by the inventors of film narrative—the creators of its forms, genres, and technology—are the cornerstones of the collection, and every major artist of the silent era is represented, as are the innovators and masters of the sound era. Important works by animators, early avant-garde artists, and contemporary experimental filmmakers are also collected.

Video appeared in the permanent collections in the 1970s, almost as soon as artists began to use this less-expensive and more-flexible alternative to film. Virtually overnight this new medium established its own aesthetic, a “cool” feeling quite different from that of film, which tends to be described as “warm.” In recent years, digital technology has supplanted analog in the creation of video, and single-channel video art, meant to be viewed primarily in theaters or dedicated “black box” galleries, while still a vibrant form, has ceded its prominence to sculptural media installations that incorporate the moving image in new and unexpected ways. These distinctions are not absolute, of course, as artists have worked and will continue to work in the mediums that suit their visions. No matter what form they may take in the future, artworks that utilize motion pictures will continue to be acquired, cared for, and exhibited by The Museum of Modern Art.

**Conservation**

Motion picture film and videotape decay. The rate at which they do so varies depending on a great many factors, including the materials used in their manufacture, the way they are handled during projection and playback, and the conditions under which they are stored. Given proper handling, decomposition can be slowed, but it cannot be prevented. As soon as a film print or videotape leaves the laboratory, it begins its inevitable decline. This is the reality that haunts—and challenges—moving-image archivists and conservators the world over. We at the Museum have always gone about our work of collecting and exhibiting film, video, and media works with the knowledge that ours is an inherently unstable art form.

A film or video is truly a work of art only when it is exhibited; otherwise, it is simply a roll of acetate (or nitrate, or polyester) sitting on a shelf in a cold vault. At the same time, to exhibit a film without properly protecting
it by creating new negatives and duplicate prints (or, in the case of video, by transferring it to a more stable tape format or digital file) is to ensure the eventual disappearance of these works through neglect.

For many years, archivists and scholars have attempted to quantify how much of the world's film heritage has been lost. Conservative estimates have claimed that fifty percent of the world's pre-1950 film production has been lost forever, including fully eighty percent of the films from the silent era. After 1950 the numbers improve, but the problems multiply with the proliferation of color and sound technologies. One need only open the lid on a can of film suffering from “vinegar syndrome” to know that the hope of stability promised by early safety-film stocks was premature at best, and the many dozens of early video formats that lie on shelves and in vaults all over the world, unavailable for viewing because the tapes and the machinery to play them are no longer being manufactured, attest to the ephemeral nature of the form. All moving-image formats require vigilance if they are to survive.

Modern film and media conservation is a testament to that vigilance, whether it is done by an underfunded, understaffed, nonprofit archive or in a Hollywood studio with all of its considerable financial resources. Having once seen each other as adversaries, commercial and nonprofit archives today have come to understand that they are partners in a never-ending effort. Indeed, were it not for cooperative initiatives such as that between the major American film archives (the Museum’s among them) and Sony, where the latter's Columbia studio holdings have been systematically evaluated and preserved, films like On the Waterfront, It Should Happen to You, and Fail-Safe might not be available for future generations to study and enjoy. The final product of such conservation may be a pristine print, restored using the best surviving preprint materials (negatives and/or fine-grain masters) and resulting in a film that can look and sound better than it did when first released, or it may be a new print that cannot help but show the ravages of time—scratches, dirt, missing footage, poor sound. This is unavoidable, since often the only reason a film survives at all is because someone somewhere had the foresight or the luck to hold onto what proved to be the last remaining copy. Usually in the public domain, these “orphan films” are taken in and cared for by the nonprofit archives of the world. No apologies need be made for the condition of these films; we are lucky they survive at all.

This leads to a question of semantics. “Conservation” is an umbrella term that encompasses both restoration and preservation. The two latter terms are not synonymous; in fact, they can be two very different things. When a film is preserved, at the very minimum a new preservation negative is made, from which subsequent prints may be struck. Special care is taken in the making of the negative, and every effort is made to minimize the effects of wear and tear on the source material, often an old exhibition print. Special printing methods may be used in an attempt to eliminate scratches, and, given enough time and money, digital technology may be employed to correct flaws in either the image or the sound or both, but the final product is essentially a copy of the original source material, with its deepest flaws often still evident.

Restoration requires significantly more work. The objective is to bring the film back as closely as possible to its condition upon initial release, which can only be accomplished if an original or preservation negative already survives or if multiple prints of the subject exist. With such materials, the conservator is able to compare and combine elements into a reasonable approximation of the film’s original release. In the case of silent films, intertitles may be damaged or missing, in which case original production records, copyright registration documents, or censorship reports may allow for the recreation of essential narrative information. Whatever the process, the conservator must work with a light touch, lest the final product reflect his or her preconceptions and tastes rather than the vision of the original filmmakers.

The restoration of a film always involves its preservation, but preserving a film does not always result in a restoration. Most important of all, a film has not been preserved unless the final product is a film—a series of sequentially exposed photographic images fixed in an emulsion on an acetate or polyester base. Transferring a movie to DVD or some other digital format, “digitally restored” or not, is neither restoration nor preservation. It may be a convenient and welcome addition to a home library, but it does nothing to ensure the continued existence of the film as a film.

In the case of video, the process is both simpler and more complicated—simpler because the best solution is usually a transfer to a high-end, currently viable format that can be used both for stable storage and future duplication; more complicated because the aesthetic choices involved can be difficult, sometimes impossible, to achieve. The differences between a moving image generated on video in 1970 and one recorded digitally to a file in 2006 are many and significant, and the tendency among
technicians is to “correct” for those differences so that the old image looks somehow “better,” or more pleasing to the eye. However, as in film, that is an artist’s choice and not one available to a curator or a conservator. The goal is to save the original—if not in its physical condition, then at least in appearance, so that contemporary audiences may appreciate the impact of the original work.

The final element in conservation involves proper storage. In 1996 the Museum opened the Celeste Bartos Center for Film Preservation in Pennsylvania’s Pocono Mountains, one hundred miles west of New York City. Its two buildings hold the sum total of the Museum’s seventy years of film and video collecting, as well as the special collections that have been assembled to assist researchers in their explorations of film art and culture. A fuller description of the Center is included at the end of this volume’s plate section.

Exhibition

Whether drawn from its own collections or built around those of other institutions, the Museum’s film- and media-exhibition programs are designed to present audiences with the finest examples of the moving image. As our permanent collections are international in scope, representing all genres and time periods, so too are our exhibitions.

In its earliest years, the Film Library was America’s only exhibitor of film’s then-brief history. Barry, in a 1937 report to the Museum’s Board of Trustees, stated simply and clearly that the Museum’s public film programs would seek “to achieve a consciousness of history and tradition within the new art of the motion picture,” and she and her colleagues set about to do just that. In the first three years of its existence, the Film Library was in contact with over fifteen hundred organizations nationwide, more than one hundred of which rented the programs that Barry and her colleagues had organized under such broad themes as “A Short Survey of the Film in America, 1895–1932” and “The Film in France.” This circulating program was in keeping with similar initiatives in other of the Museum’s curatorial departments, all of which were designed to promote modern art through touring exhibitions as well as within its own walls. With the opening of the West Fifty-third Street building in 1939, the Film Library acquired a dedicated theater, now known as the Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1, in which to present its rapidly growing archive on a regular basis.

A second theater (Titus 2) was opened in the mid-1980s, with a third (the Celeste Bartos Theater) slated to appear in late 2006, and the film-exhibition program has grown to include video and digital media, both of which are presented in the new Yoshiko and Akio Morita Gallery, on the second floor of the new Museum building designed by architect Yoshio Taniguchi and opened in November 2004. Together these venues house the most-diverse and longest-running film- and media-exhibition programs in America.

As with other curatorial departments, the Museum’s film and media exhibitions are often made up of works on loan from other institutions or individuals. The Museum regularly screens films from FIAF-member archives, as well as from studio and personal collections, and in so doing it readily acknowledges the fact that, unlike seventy years ago, when film was but four decades old, the Museum’s archive cannot possibly hope to contain the entire depth and breadth of moving-image history.

In addition to numerous onetime exhibitions devoted to individual filmmakers or national cinemas, the Museum presents a wide variety of annual series such as New Directors/New Films, organized in cooperation with the Film Society of Lincoln Center and dedicated to presenting the finest new work by directors not already familiar to New York audiences; To Save and Project: The MoMA International Festival of Film Preservation, which, as its title suggests, offers the latest preserved films from archives around the world; and Documentary Fortnight, a showcase for compelling work in that genre. Offering up to six concurrent film and media series each month, averaging four screenings a day, six days a week, the Museum continues to take seriously Barry’s early determination to foster in its audiences an appreciation of international film culture.

Education

Broadly defined, the work of any curatorial department in any museum is educational in nature. Since the inception of the Film Library, the Museum has been dedicated to expanding its reach beyond its theaters through its circulating-film and archival-loan programs, as well as through participation in the activities of the Department of Education. Regular educational programs include, among others, Friday Night at the Movies, a semester-long thematic film series offered to New York City high school students in which lively discussions about the narrative content of films often lead to a deeper appreciation of cinematic form and grammar, and Watch This! and Family Films, both designed to create conversations between young children and their parents based on the viewing of short films and videos, with short accompanying talks by professionals in the field.
The Museum maintains a separate study center for film and media, distinct from its library and archives. Voluminous newspaper- and periodical-clipping files, a strong collection of key reference works, facilities for personal film and video viewing, and, not least, a curatorial staff dedicated to the dissemination of knowledge about the moving image in all its forms have made the Museum one of the world's leading centers for film and media study. Our special collections include original manuscripts, scripts, posters, rare books and periodicals, graphic materials, and a wide array of film ephemera, as well as one of the largest collections of film stills in the world, all of which are available to the serious student or researcher. The history of the moving image would be incomplete without such rich contextual materials.

This book is not a history of film, nor is it a complete visual record of the Museum's film and media collections. As already noted, those collections currently hold over twenty thousand works, and so for every film and video included in the plate section and checklist of this book, forty-five others have had to be left out—not because they are unworthy of note but because difficult choices had to be made. In the end, I have tried to represent the riches of the film and media collections through a careful selection of compelling images that will give the reader a better sense of just how wondrous these holdings are. A number of short texts are placed throughout, offering background information about key films and significant collections. My goal has been to give the reader a greater appreciation of what we do at The Museum of Modern Art and a clearer understanding of how we try our best “to make you see.”

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