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### The Intrusive, Necessary Labor of Archivists in the Face of Change

Experiencing a film that has been nearly lost to time is thrilling because of a persistent engagement with the material it is presented on. Film strips present their history and bear it upon the viewer, and preservation artists provide a chance to witness these films again along with their continued evolution through time. The stunning images from *Abwege* (1928), for instance, capture the details of the preserved image's history, yet the labor of the preservation artists is visible in the changing tints throughout the film's print. This labor of those involved in these salvaged images presents new layers of production and experience in an ever-growing expansion of those involved with the making of the film. On one hand, it saves those prints and presents the footage to new audiences in stunning dedication to the original print; on the other hand, it seems like some type of infringement on the original film print with the liberties taken with its new presentation. In the age of digital technologies, these liberties go as far as to scale up old shorts by the Lumière brothers by using AI technologies. While these restorations or reconstructions present the original films, the alteration in the material and presentation itself brings up interesting questions for the presentation and reception of restored silent cinema: just how much is too much for preservation and restoration artists; how does the audience experience these changes; and how do scholars and viewers discuss these images in new contexts? It is important to examine the components and the presence of the film reel's history alongside the inevitability of its changes in efforts to preserve it. Additionally, we, the viewers, always see and feel the decades, the wear and tear, the decay of reels, and the reconstruction of these images in our experience of these artifacts. Films like *Apaches of Athens* (1930), *Abwege* (1928), and even the

Lumière shorts each display levels of obtrusive restoration measures. The labor of the preservation artists presents their hands in ways that add another level of production and people to thank in the long history of cinema as it changes with the rise of changing technologies.

Before exploring the films and questions presented in the introduction, I need to address my usage of “I” and “we” throughout this examination. The personal angle prefaces my own favoring of these new, altered images and the inevitable possibilities afforded with research and technologies. In formal routes of film writing, it is always encouraged to explore the artifacts in the third-person point of view to remain objective in providing evidence. As a modern media scholar, I am fascinated by these new mediums or decontextualizations of the material as it represents a change in history—a move away from the historical to one partially ahistorical. It’s a big question that I want to discuss regarding my experience because of my focus on more modern forms. As a graduate student, films like *The Flying Train, Germany* (1902) and *Snow Fight* (1897) suddenly captured my heart as a peek into a world that is wholly inaccessible to modern audiences. However, the film reel is a finicky—if not downright offensive—piece of media in its retaliation of constant decay and difficulty in preserving. Archives go through incredible work to preserve the images and relics of the past. Paolo Cherchi Usai, in his book *Silent Film: An Introduction*, claims, “archives have only two options: to be content with the best they can find, or to keep on searching for better copies, believing in miracles and hoping for the best.”<sup>1</sup> This is perhaps the most important part of the experience of silent film preservation, reconstruction, and remastering. The strips that we hold onto are recollections of the past experienced in proximity. The feeling of the theater and the physical medium of these films provide a strong experience to these images of the past because of their inherent physicality. However, the online format presented a curious case study into the preservation of old media, and the changes afforded with

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<sup>1</sup> Cherchi Usai, Paolo. *Silent Cinema: An Introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p. 49.

these images. They are shaping a version of these films that represent a portion of film history and present the film in newly formed ways to allow more audiences exposure to these forms.

The first case study at play is *Apaches of Athens* (1930)—the film restoration with perhaps the least intrusive changes to the film print but remaining questions of changing contexts with the presentation of the operetta soundtrack. We can see that the film has not been tampered with as much as other restorations due to the prevalence of the film scratches on the left and right sides of the frame. When taking note of these scratches, it appears that they are relics of the reel's storage; the scratches are fervent in the second half of the film—most likely from it being on a second reel—and these scratches disappear during the title card. While these scratches may be distracting, I found myself fascinated by their energy as they display the decades of wear and tear. They highlight Usai's proclamations about the archival film: "It is the survivor of a complex, often random process of selection, not much different from a Darwinian evolutionary scheme."<sup>2</sup> The animated energy of these scratches gives the audience a glimpse into the labored history of the film. The energy of these scratches openly displays the history of the reel and the efforts of the preservation artists to engage with the best that they have; when they disappear in the title cards, we are reminded that the print is the best they have, and they chose not to alter them in an effort to present the film cleanly. However, the music presents a question of how silent films should be presented in a modern age. Should the music evolve with the times or stay true to its original presentation? In the case of *Apaches of Athens* (1930), the new music adds to the experience.

Now, the music is not quite *new*, but "reconstructed" from the original operetta that the film is based with "three new songs that were specially composed for the film."<sup>3</sup> These news songs are

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<sup>2</sup> Cherchi Usai, Paolo. *Silent Cinema: An Introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> Kominos, Maria. "Oi Apachides Ton Athinon (GR 1930)." *Le Giornante del Cinema Muto*. <http://www.giornatedelcinemamuto.it/en/oi-apachides-ton-athinon/>. Accessed 30 January 2021.

quite contentious because it is both inaccurate and faithful. Yes, these songs may have been very different when the film was shown. However, these songs present the emotions of the characters in more ways than just the visual. We *see and hear* the emotion expressed by the actor and the singer, respectively. Moments of stillness and characters gazing off frame heighten the effects of the “aria” in an operetta—moments where the music has the characters decrying their emotions. For instance, when Petros gazes back to Vera’s home after being thrown out of the party, the slow movements of his head emphasize the powerful emotion in the music. The punctuated long shots of the home also heighten this dramatic moment as the singer reaches for glorious heights in proclaiming the emotions rushing through Petros. The viewer can both see the drama in the facial expressions and the long shots of the home, but the music accentuates this emotion. It replicates the modern soundtracks to *Page of Madness* (1929), a film mentioned briefly during the Collegium. In these cases, the music does not comply with what the music may have been when performed alongside the films’ original showing; today, the noise soundtrack to *Page of Madness* (1929) heightens the horror.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, and perhaps importantly, it allows modern audiences easier access to the films because it contrasts classical music with jittery pianos. The music compliments the images in ways that add to the experience of the films and bring to light artists years after the initial creation still contributing to the continued tradition of the film.

The next case study contains more intrusive changes to the film print: *Abwege* (1928) and its changing tinting. The radical changes in this film are somewhat minuscule yet also blare their presence with finesse and grace. The website for La Giornante Del Cinema states that the colors were based on a film review from 1929 in *Close-Up* and claims “The new restoration tries to reconstruct the colors, modeling them upon conventions of the period.”<sup>5</sup> Now, this is important to

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<sup>4</sup> The conversations during the Collegium often pointed to these directions in tangential conversations. I latched onto some of these moments, like this film and later the Lumière shorts, because of my eagerness to find more information as a modern film scholar that was interested in becoming more in tune with silent film history.

<sup>5</sup> Droessler, Stefan. “Abwege (DE 1928).” *Le giornante del cinema muto*. <http://www.giornatedelcinemamuto.it/en/abwege/>. Accessed 30 January 2021.

discuss because, even though the website claims the colors are based on conventions, it directly questions Usai's characterization of tinting conventions: "If it were simply a matter of associating [colors] with events or such emotional states as hatred or passion, the palette would have been rather limited, *if only because the symbolic meanings of [color] were never codified or generally agreed upon by the public.*"<sup>6</sup> While the colors are not based on a living print of the film, the Munich Film Archive chose to add the colors in a way that displays proudly the work of archivists—an art that goes beyond the original making of the film. These colors lend a hand towards the already disorienting sense of time and space present in the film; this is due to the lack of a general agreement on the symbolic meaning of colors, as stated by Usai. Because the colors shift in the middle of a scene—changing with the nebulous idea of emotional coloring Usai discusses—the disorientation heightens itself even further as Irene and Frank deal with the difficulty of their relationship. For instance, the final scenes as they go through the divorce trial have three colors throughout the scene: blue, brown, and red. These colors force me to question the point of the coloring by thinking that the time is rapidly changing from day to night to day again. Then, I wonder if it reflects the fluctuating emotions of sadness, anger, and then small reconciliation in the final shots. Perhaps it is meant to be both and neither of these simultaneously. If the former, then the time of the trial is being stretched into infinity as the two battle over the fall of their relationship. If the latter, then their emotions are reflected in the audience in ways that eschews the need for title card slides to tell the audience. It enhances the performances, accentuates the disorienting themes throughout the film, and gives the finale a powerful emotion of pure melancholy—*depressing yet hopeful*. While the changes here are not directly based on an existing print, the archivists' work provides a new way to engage the material as it helps to provide new insight into the characters as they descend into depression and betrayal.

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<sup>6</sup> Cherchi Usai, Paolo. *Silent Cinema: An Introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p. 26. Emphasis added.

Finally, I want to touch on the topic of conversation of when intrusive changes perhaps move audiences away from the original print: the upscaled Lumière shorts. After watching a few days of travelogue shorts, these shorts were brought up to a mix of emotions—mainly fear and aghast from most of the members of the Collegium. The conversation is working on two levels: digitization and changes to the original print. First, let's discuss the digitization of films in the new age. Just as Giovanni Fossati, writer of *From Grain to Pixel*, states, the move to digital is both being embraced and rejected. The prevalence of analog film, the inherent materiality of experimental and silent films, and the budgetary problems with fully committing to the digital prevents archives from fully going digital provides a slew of different responses for scholars of film history.<sup>7</sup> For many, the fear of losing the printed films are real and valid, and the terrifying aspect of storage also brings a question to the table of how to archive the footage correctly and safely. In the meeting with members of the EYE Museum, the discussion of the file storage raised red flags with numbers like “1.5 TB (terabytes) for one 2k short,” “4-6TB hard drives,” and “20 PB hard drives” to store the films become terrifying, and the move to digital means that once it is digital, it cannot go back to the film. The question of storage creates a conundrum of if digital files are feasible; considering my own modern studies, I see the benefit of digital hard drives over large reels of film. However, I'm cautious to completely engage digitally because if a hard drive crashes, the reel once again acts as the material, physical history that we can engage.

With this in mind, we can visit the horrific marvel of the upscaled Lumière shorts.<sup>8</sup> Here, I want to return to my two favorite shorts I mentioned above: *The Flying Train* (1902) and *Snow Fight* (1897). Upon seeing these films in a Film History course I co-taught with Dr. Marsha Gordon in 2018, I felt at peace with the fact that I finally understood the hype of these older films; I am

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<sup>7</sup> Fossati, Giovanni. *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*. Third Edition, Amsterdam University Press, 2018, p. 85.

<sup>8</sup> I call it both “horrific” and “marvelous” here because of the mixed emotions of scholars. While I find these breathtaking and wonderful, I also recognize the fears that are associated with these shorts.

looking into the past, seeing architecture, and recognizing the joy of having a snowball fight that I have experienced so many times throughout my life. There is something so innocent about these one-shot shorts, shot at a distance, and displaying people in a period over 100 years ago. However, then I came across the upscaled versions of these shorts; instead of being horrified at the changes to the film, I was suddenly reminded of the fact that the images I see are not fabricated—they are real people in a time inaccessible to me. While the technology upscaled and colorizing these images do not reflect what the filmmakers intended or were capable of, there is a constant, inherent curiosity that comes along with these images. Yes, the intrusive nature of the artificial intelligence and program working on the film can be terrifying, but it also shows an incredible leap in technology that gives more primacy to places and times that I cannot encounter. Giovanni Fossati states, “As material artifacts, they are both analog and digital (e.g. the nitrate film stored in the archive’s vault and its digitization stored on a server and available online); as conceptual artifacts, they are both the historical artifact and the historized one (e.g. the nitrate film and its reenactment via a digital projection).”<sup>9</sup> This rapid evolution in technology allows the preservation and recreation of these images in a way that gives viewers views. There is something precious about seeing the faces of those children throwing snowballs in Moscow and witnessing the man riding his bike fall to the ground. Instead of getting up in frustration, the upscaled provides an insight to show that he is joining in on the fun with a large smile and laughter. These upscaled shorts give a preview that is altered tremendously, but the labor of the program and the artist behind the AI becomes present in the making of these films. The new context of the digital age brings a new look into the past that may have been impossible only ten years ago. Gone are the smudges over the faces of these unrecognizable people because suddenly, thanks to the programmer and the program, we recognize a new yet familiar humanity behind the images.

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<sup>9</sup> Fossati, Giovanni. *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*. Third Edition, Amsterdam University Press, 2018, p. 151.

The preservation of both the digital and film exist, and the free use of the images provide people a new way to explore and see the past. It's a history that becomes new to those viewing these images. An accessed place that suddenly humanizes the kids throwing snowballs in Moscow, gives weight to the flying train in Germany, and provides a new experience for those unfamiliar with silent films. By enacting changes, the viewer is suddenly reminded of the humanity behind the images. Music gives them new insight that hooks them in because it sounds different from the plucky piano. Changing tints can enlighten the viewer into feeling even more disoriented by the emotions of a deteriorating marriage. Upscaled and reconstructed images give a glimpse into history that was impossible to fully grasp prior. By embracing the power of the archival artists, these images can become a way to engage with a history of art that can continue to evolve because of new artists that want to find new ways to experience and witness the moving image. In these cases, the hands of the preservation artists may intrude on a piece of art, but they are simply there to remind us that without them, we may not have these images at all.



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