

## Why Screen a Fragment?

Russell Zych, Giornate del Cinema Muto Collegium 2022

### **Introduction: For Whom Should We Smoothen?**

I came to the 42nd Giornate del Cinema Muto just a few months after completing a Media Archival Studies program at the University of California, Los Angeles. This is just one of the many credential programs that, when taken altogether, demonstrate how the profession of film archiving and preservation has claimed the legitimacy that it sought just decades ago.<sup>1</sup> I begin by mentioning my training and the established state of the field in hopes that the reader will view my argument here as good faith rather than short-sighted or contrarian.

I also mention my training to explain why I was particularly excited for the Collegium dialogue that took place at the festival on Thursday: approaches to restoration. Even with my limited experience, it seems to me that there will never be a single restoration methodology that can apply to every project. While I still believe there are no absolutes in film preservation, the hour-long discussion did far more to intensify my convictions than anything from my coursework and training. This dialogue was not the first time I encountered a film archives professional with the perspective that restoration work should create “a smooth experience for the audience,” but it was the first time I felt certain that I disagreed, and the first time I could sense a few clues as to why that was.

Perhaps my objection to a smooth film viewing experience is unfair—after all, one catches more flies with honey than vinegar. So I can understand why a film preservationist might want a final product that is easy to digest and appealing to the broadest possible audience. Still, something about this approach felt dangerously limiting. Perhaps this reaction was the bias of someone attending a festival dedicated to examining silent films—a week spent watching more films than I can possibly remember. I concede that the Giornate del Cinema Muto, of course, does not host an audience that is representative of filmgoing audiences anywhere else. Throughout the week my fellow collegians and I could not help but remark again and again that we had never been around so many other people our age that were interested in silent cinema.

Despite the privilege of joining an international cohort of young cinephiles, I was still sure of my conviction that there was plenty of joy and curiosity in an unsmooth film-viewing experience for every audience. This has inspired me to consider the virtues of what might’ve been the festival’s least smooth viewing experience: an 11 minute fragment from *Camille* (1927).

I believe that archivists, programmers, scholars, and historians must strive to make fragments, incomplete films, and other less-than-ideal materials a cornerstone of cinemathèque and festival programming. I feel that ideals like completeness, perfection, and faithful authenticity do more to obstruct the preservation of silent cinema than aid it. Such notions bolster a harmful myth of technical objectivity in archival practice. Preservation work is never objective or passive; it will always reflect the perspective and priorities of the people that do the work. Most, if not all, film archivists and historians are aware that this is the case—I suspect that most casual enthusiasts recognize this too. Still, I think the entire repertory exhibition landscape would benefit from an increased exhibition of film fragments and presentation of other incomplete, imperfect, or less-than-ideal material. These

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<sup>1</sup> Edmondson, Ray. 1995. “Is Film Archiving a Profession?” *Film History* 7.3 (Fall 1995): 245-255.

Edmondson, Ray. 2017. “Is Film Archiving a Profession Yet? Reflections 20 Years On.” *Synoptique* 6 (1): 14–22.

“unsmooth” materials have the incredible potential to foster a more critical view of film spectatorship, scholarship, and stewardship.

### **What’s Wrong with a Fragment?**

By definition a fragment is incomplete. With my convenient addition of the broad “less-than-ideal materials” to my above discussion of film fragments, I mean to extend the argument of this essay to any case where some (but not all) of the information a viewer may desire has been lost, removed, overwritten, or is otherwise unavailable.

Anyone not sharing my liberal definition of a fragment would find only one on the 2022 schedule. *Camille* (1927) was the only title with “[frammento/fragment]” listed alongside the other standard details, such as the director (Fred Niblo), projection format (DCP, for Digital Cinema Package), and runtime (11 minutes). This was the first time I had encountered the inclusion of a film fragment within a formal festival line-up. While there are few, if any, good faith reasons that a film fragment would be desirable over a complete copy, especially in a festival context, there still remains many ways that their inclusion can provide an urgent counterbalance to the dogmas of completeness, perfection, and historical authenticity.

Of course, I don’t think I have ever actually seen or heard any programmer, curator, or archive/cinematheque exhibitor explicitly refuse or disapprove of fragments. Nevertheless—insofar as curation is the active expression of one’s values through the selection and arrangement of material—we might infer from the scarcity of fragments in festival and repertory programming that the practice currently enjoys little support. This may be my own anecdotal observation, and, unfortunately all I can add to further substantiate the point is anecdotal as well: after sharing my excitement about the fragment of *Camille* with the festival’s Artistic Director Jay Weissberg, I was shocked to learn that his inclusion of film fragments in past programs had provoked some pushback and criticism.

While I cannot pretend to have any accurate sense of what these critics believe, I can consider which aspects make a film fragment unappealing in general. In almost all circumstances, the complete version of any artifact would be preferable to one that lacks material. When it comes to the print of a Hollywood feature film (like those included in the Giornate’s Norma Talmadge program), the fragment might have almost no exhibition value in the traditional sense; missing exposition, narrative gaps, and other inconsistencies will make it almost impossible to emulate the experience of the film’s first audiences. But is that the only draw of silent cinema today?

Fragments lack a straightforward path to evaluating the film’s meaning and value. Even if you provide the audience with an account of the plot from credible secondary sources, the experience of receiving that narrative information directly from the work remains unavailable. In other words, the plot of a film is not the same as the film’s actual enunciation of that plot to the audience—any and all desired substitutes will never be exact replacements and there will always remain a margin of inference or imagination between the audience and the material that once existed.

### **Why Prize Completeness?**

I imagine plot gaps and inconsistencies are a popular deterrent for many film programmers and curators. Even a specialized audience will be liable to feel some disappointment about such gaps and unavailability. Still, does that mean the fragment of *Camille* had no compelling cause for inclusion? Is

there nothing to appreciate about a film element beyond the text of its narrative? What might be more interesting than effective or comprehensive storytelling?

In the context of Giornate's program tracing the career of Norma Talmadge, this fragment presents some rich metatextual appeal: though it would be her last film for First National, *Camille* was the first time Talmadge worked opposite Gilbert Roland. The film's production played host to the beginning of their very public affair. There is good reason to suspect that any material where Talmadge and Roland share the screen might offer insight into the dynamic between performance and reality. This was certainly part of the appeal for Jay, who mentioned to the Collegium that their notable on-screen chemistry made the fragment an essential inclusion.

At the Thursday afternoon program, I was delighted to see those sparks for myself and the fragment did not disappoint. Weeks after the Giornate, I would return to watch the scene and find the sparks remained.<sup>2</sup>

In a scene where Talmadge and Roland make their first face to face acquaintance, the actors' eyes are set in a sturdy focus that continues between edits: Roland enters on a waist-high medium shot, and the actors lock onto each other immediately. Talmadge becomes rigid from the neck-down, her stillness accentuated by long wispy feathers that billow off her costume's shoulder. As the lovers draw close, a pair of close-ups afford each the opportunity to broadcast their mutual attraction. Roland softens his gaze into a dreamy but immovable stare as he draws her hand to his mouth for a kiss. Talmadge flutters her eyelashes and her lips just barely escape a trembling fit in order to utter some dialogue.

The fragment's very next scene shows Roland discovering Talmadge as she lay unconscious after a coughing fit (her character has tuberculosis). Again, there is a palpable charge between the performers. Roland descends to fill the left half of the frame and cradles a spellbound Talmadge. The scene plays out over intimate two-shots and close-ups. Before he leaves, Talmadge places a key to her bedroom in his hand. After an insert close-up of the key traveling between their palms and a title with dialogue asking him to return tomorrow night after eleven o'clock, Roland clasps her hands in his and then showers a burst of kisses from her knuckles down to her wrist. Then, Roland, in a single crisp motion, lets go of her hands and circles to the door. Though Roland has stepped away, Talmadge lets her arms hover in the air for a beat before casting them back over her head. Despite her static blocking, the physicality of her performance gives a hauntingly dynamic impression.

The scene left me spellbound. I had no need for plot exposition, at least not any on-screen exposition. The ardor shared between these performers was interesting enough, and there were plenty of narratives outside the text of *Camille* that welcomed these scenes.

Further, if I had lacked the additional context about Talmadge and Gilbert's affair, the fragment held no shortage of avenues for exploration. In addition to the performances, the fragment teased a wondrous array of costumes and set dressings. Even if one had no interest in the film's craft, the fragment also presented plenty of compelling physical characteristics. Let us consider, in practical terms, what was shown to the audience at Pordenone that Thursday afternoon.

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<sup>2</sup> Many thanks to Lynanne Schweighofer, Heather Linville, and George Willeman at the Library of Congress Film Preservation Laboratory for their generosity in making this material available for closer review.

### **Is Decomposition Too Distracting?**

In order for these images to grace the screen in the Teatro Verdi, the film print had to be scanned. It is easy to think about film scanning as a simple migration of visual content, but I find it helpful to think about it as a particular form of digital production (or reproduction). After all, once the scan is complete, the film does not disappear. One could even perform another scan years later and compare the differences between each digital copy.

Reframing *film scanning as digital production* drives us right to the question of smooth experiences. Digital scans afford a much wider suite of tools for image manipulation, but how does a preservationist know where to stop? They can remove scratches and dust. They can stabilize jitters. They can freeze title cards, or reconstruct title cards with a vast array of typography options. In the case of *Camille*, however, there was a chemical challenge that has not yet found its digital solution: the fragment presents some notable signs of decomposition.

Throughout the last half of the bedroom scene I describe above, there is some print damage that runs vertically over the rightmost edge of the frame. The deterioration resembles a column of gray puddles, as if someone has cut transparent cellophane into a bunch of blobs that resemble a giraffe's spots or a classic army man camouflage pattern. This parade of blobs is limited to just one fifth of the frame, all the way to the right. Though it occasionally runs up Norma's face, it mostly remains out of the lovers' way. While Talmadge is in profile, the spots float up just behind her head. While this might seem distracting to some, I had no problem following the action.

Further, in some cases I found the deterioration to cast an additional layer of romantic mysticism over the scene. In fact, talking with some fellow Collegians afterward I was happy to learn I was not the only one who feels that some instances of decomposition and damage can even be quite beautiful.

Deterioration like this is not unique to fragments, but in many cases where just a fragment survives, the remainder of the material has been irreversibly lost to decomposition. In other words, fragments are quite likely to display such damage or decomposition. This can certainly be one reason an archive might not want to share the material with the public. At late stages of decomposition, there is almost nothing that can be done to repair the affected image. Even if the print is in good enough shape to run through a projector or scanner, the damage and decomposition might obscure essential visual elements or make the picture illegible.

There is also a chance that unfamiliar viewers might mistakenly take the deterioration as evidence of sloppy restoration work or irresponsible stewardship. This means that screening a fragment can open the archive to unfair criticism or harm its reputation. As such, we might say that with this scan of the fragment, the preservation staff at the Library of Congress were also sending their trust over to the *Giornate*.

This fragment demonstrates that there can be responsible paths to access when conventional values are set aside: even though the fragment is far too damaged to run through a projector, many scanners are designed to pass a film strip under their digital eye without thrashing any sprocket teeth through perforations or applying an unsafe amount of tension. In other words, there are cases where analog presentation can be sacrificed in exchange for otherwise impossible acts of preservation.

This digital presentation of the fragment from *Camille* gave me a sense of what was possible when exploration and trust were put above prestige and convention. It may not have been smooth or easy for the audience to digest, but it sure gave me something to chew on for the rest of my career.

### **How Can We Know What the Audience Expects?**

It was long after the fragment's spell had finally broken, when I realized that I was not familiar with the Dumas novel from which *Camille* had been adapted and I had not sought out a synopsis beforehand. I did not yet know what fate would befall these lovers. Returning to the program note, I was amused to find that Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs had given almost no space to plot summary. They instead discuss the film's position in the arc of Talmadge's career, speculate on her motivations for selecting the role, detail Roland's path to success, acknowledge the stars' affair, explain that the Library of Congress salvaged this fragment from a workprint held by a private collector. They make an excellent case for the fragment's relevance to the program without any reliance on narrative or conventional appeal.

Though I didn't really observe any distaste for the fragment among my fellow Collegians or the audience that afternoon, I do think there are a number of conventional assumptions about audience expectations that implicitly or inadvertently draw unfair boundaries between film elements with historical, artistic, technical, or commercial significance and those with "nothing to offer." In fact, I'd hope many of my colleagues have spent some time wondering whether some fragments are just one or two screenings away from gaining significant recognition and broader appreciation. Has every film restoration project waited until a complete set of components was available? What if it takes the inclusion of a fragment from *Camille* in the Giornate schedule to cultivate sufficient momentum around the search for more surviving elements? To keep a fragment off the schedule out of concern for incompleteness or the embarrassment of imperfection risks condemning that fragment to be forgotten.

I suppose conventional wisdom would suggest that an audience will be more impressed by a special, exhaustive, impeccable, and impressively authentic new restoration of a well-known classic. Still, I am not entirely sure that they wouldn't want a drastically different program either. Further, I'm far from convinced that the two are mutually exclusive. What might come when we direct as much attention to the unrestored works as we do to recent accomplishments in technical innovation. What would it mean to give institutional space to the broken, the absent, or incomplete?

### **Conclusion: Questions with Answers to Come**

Of course, I cannot speak for anyone but myself, but I feel that an aspiration towards "smooth experiences" can hinder the endeavor of film preservation just as much as it might help broaden the appeal to general audiences. I did not venture to the 42nd Giornate del Cinema Muto in search of smooth experiences. I was not there for simple, neat, problem-free exhibitions.

Further, this impulse towards smoothening raises countless questions about the mission of film restoration, preservation, scholarship, and spectatorship: I'm sure that no film archivist would disagree that films are preserved so that they can be seen, but I do suspect that one would encounter some disagreement from extending the question further—so they can be seen where? Under what circumstances? And by who? for whom should films be preserved? Who, exactly, do we suspect will seek these films out? What kind of experience do we imagine they will desire? What kind of experience should they expect? What, realistically, can we offer?

Like filmmaking, film curation and film restoration can be an active expression of values. Therefore, we might say that curating archival programs and restoration work presents (at least) two layers of expression. I think it is important to celebrate the labor of archival professionals and historians, but I wonder if complete restorations, pristine film elements, and authentic presentation are the only way to do so. In other words, what values are expressed through the exclusion of elements exclusively on the basis that they are incomplete, imperfect, or odd? I wonder who might be the ideal audience of a restoration project or repertory screening. Who has been left out? What should we assume to be the priorities or interests of these audiences? Are they impatient, capricious, or hard-to-please? Are they easily distracted or will they always arrive at the theater with sharp focus and sufficient background knowledge?

These questions can multiply so easily that I sometimes feel there is no point in quibbling over answers. At my most optimistic, however, I believe that responsible stewardship of silent cinema should involve chipping away such questions. On this point, I have even more anecdotal evidence from the Giornate to supply—on that very same Thursday that I heard about “smooth experiences” and marveled at the fragment from *Camille*, I was also lucky enough to speak with film researchers Laura Horack and Maggie Hennefeld. Once the duo had finished tossing the last of their *Cinema’s First Nasty Women* t-shirts to a mob of ecstatic fans, I had a chance to ask them for more details on the silent film audience demographics research they had announced. Given everything else on my mind, inquiry into the demographics of silent film viewers felt like a fantastic way to put some concrete parameters on my musing about the relationship between curatorial priorities, scholarship, and preservation. When I return to Pordenone next year, I think there may be just a few answers we can begin to collect.