becoming an expert system

an intervention into the public role of film heritage institutes

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The following text is a precis of my PhD dissertation, titled *Showing and telling: film heritage institutes and their performance of accountability*. I consider the work as a whole an intervention into the public role of these institutes. In this article there is only room to describe general tendencies; however, the exceptions that are mentioned in the dissertation do not make these tendencies less appreciable.

I limited my intervention to film heritage institutes that are partly or wholly subsidized from public funds and are therefore mandated by their governments and accountable to the public. I was specifically interested in the ways these institutes share their expertise and the materials entrusted to them with their public; this is what I call their performance of accountability. "Public" refers here to visitors and users of the activities and facilities offered by film heritage institutes, not the administrations that are usually informed about its management in annual reports. My focus was on the two most visible public activities: public presentations (both in-house and online) and visitor information about these presentations. Insofar as this required a survey, the websites of selected institutes provided the input for my database. The decision to base my research on their websites was not merely practical, but agrees with what the public today commonly learns about the institutes' public activities. As a matter of fact, it seems safe to say that potential visitors are expected to inform themselves of these activities through the internet, an expectation confirmed (and, I trust, a trend reinforced) by the possibility of online ticket reservation and purchase.[1]

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[1] The Cinémathèque québécoise has in fact decided to reduce the edition of its printed brochure and discontinue its mailing, the stated reason being "le désir de laisser de plus en plus de visibilité à la version numérique du dépliant."; see: *Rapport annuel 2013-2014* (Montreal: Cinémathèque québécoise, n.d. [2014]), p. 35, at:
http://www.cinematheque.qc.ca/sites/default/files/files/reports/lf_150dpi_complet_rappannuel_cq1409_0.pdf.

My investigation consisted of two complementary modes. Firstly, a number of case studies. It is an obvious truth that the majority of the institutes' public activities overwhelmingly focuses on feature fiction films and restricts their visitor information to aesthetic aspects—even though this manifests itself often as cinephilia or biography. For that reason I turned my attention in each of these studies on an archival object that is commonly considered aesthetically uninteresting and consequently not activated, that is to say lifted from the darkness of the vaults and spotlit before visitors or users. I conducted these case studies to demonstrate their contextual wealth and concluded with a plea for a curatorial practice that covers the *entire* archive and rests on a solid, research-led foundation. Such an approach not only accentuates the necessity of contextualization (whether it regards business, technological, cultural, political, economic or other aspects), lest countless archival objects remain elusive. But it also serves as a reminder of cinema being a multifaceted phenomenon. Therefore, I propose a conceptual apparatus that allows a more complete understanding of the film heritage and its histories. The apparatus consists of the following (partly overlapping) categories:

• *continuity* emphasizes the parallels and contact points between the histories of cinema and other (performing) arts, entertainments, and media, in terms of technologies, business models, personnel (ownership and management structure as well as crew or cast), narrative and presentational formats, venues or audience composition. This concept is important, for instance, in understanding the acceptance of cinema by virtue of its introduction into established entertainments, as well as for the current transition to and proliferation of digitally-based practices.

• *manifestation* refers to cinema's manifold appearances: its ways of organizing production, distribution, and marketing, its purposes, target groups, venues or presentation formats.

• *identity* focuses on the negotiation between local and international aspects, of which appropriation—local measures to adapt foreign cultural objects to legal, linguistic or market conditions, among others—, is the most ubiquitous instance.

• *experience* refers to the ways cinema appeals to spectators' imagination, world knowledge (including social and political involvement), emotions or involvement. Besides genre, narrative and presentational formats, rhetorics or style, they include the contexts most proximate to the

film screening: the specific location, architectural properties, and social meaning of a venue; the state of projection and display technologies; publicity of all kinds; program formats and live elements during a show; ephemera and memorabilia as reminders; I cluster fanzines and fanclubs in this concept, too.

These concepts propose signposts to the contexts of the film heritage in a given geographic region and historical era. As well, they are meant to align with the archival notion of what archivist Hans Booms called *functional context*, i.e. all those contexts that contribute to forming "a conception of a certain period in the development of the entire section of society".[2]

The second mode of my intervention was a survey, and its evaluation, of the public activities of 24 film heritage institutes worldwide during the month of February 2014.[3] I regard this survey as as a possible stimulus to further research, as there is no longitudinal survey of the public activities of film heritage institutes. In my evaluation I have not imposed any restrictions as to the nature of the presentations offered. But as the institutes' mission statements contained ambitions regarding their public tasks, I formulated a number of criteria to assess their public information: its quantity; its expertise; and its relevance (i.e. specific considerations that underlie their presentations). I took the three elements of a recent definition of curatorship— "[t]he art of interpreting the *aesthetics*, *history*, and *technology* of cinema through the selective

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[2] Hans Booms, 'Society and the formation of a documentary heritage: issues in the appraisal of archival sources', in: *Archivaria*, no. 24 (Summer 1987), p. 103 (orig. publ. in 1972 as 'Gesellschaftsordnung und Überlieferungsbildung: zur Problematik archivarischer Quellenbewertung').

[3] Film heritage institutes included in this survey were: Australian Cinematheque, Brisbane; Bophana Centre de Ressources audiovisuelles, Phnom Penh; British Film Institute-National Film & Television Centre, London; Centre cinématographique marocain, Rabat; Cinemateca Boliviana, La Paz; Cinemateca Brasileira, São Paulo; Cinemateca Dominicana, Santo Domingo; Cinemateca Portuguesa-Museo do Cinema, Lisbon; Cinemateca Uruguaya, Montevideo; Cinematek, Brussels; Cinémathèque de la Ville de Luxembourg; Cinémathèque française et Musée du Cinéma, Paris; Cinémathèque québécoise, Montreal; Cinémathèque suisse, Lausanne; Cineteca Nacional de México, Mexico City; Deutsches Filminstitut Filmmuseum, Frankfurt; Filmoteca de Catalunya, Barcelona; Fondazione Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia-Cineteca Nazionale, Rome; Hong Kong Film Archive; Irish Film Institute, Dublin; Jerusalem Cinematheque-Israel Film Archive; National Film Center at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision, Wellington/Auckland/Christchurch; Österreichisches Filmmuseum, Vienna; UCLA Film & Television Archive, Los Angeles.

This is a set rather than a sample, as not all institutes offer presentations, while some that do provided outdated information on their websites. Language barriers, more specifically those languages the mistakes of which made in Google Translate were beyond my powers of correction, discouraged the creation of a more representative database. I included two privately funded institutes in South America as a small counterweight to the set's unwished for Western bias.

collection, preservation, and documentation of films and their exhibition in archival presentations"[4]—as a guideline.

• With regard to *history* I conclude that film heritage institutes offer their public not only a selective, but a biased picture of film history—even apart from the abovementioned emphasis on feature fiction. Except in the display of equipment, early cinema (i.e. films made between 1895 and 1915) fails almost completely—even though the same institutes do show such works at (archival) festivals for a professional, interpretive community.[5] Noteworthy, too, was that more than a third of the film heritage institutes surveyed screened an inordinate amount of new or recent films.[6] Many of these were concurrently available in commercial distribution. This constitutes a de facto relinquishment of programming autonomy: commercial distributors will usually demand a minimum number of shows per day and a minimum number of play-weeks for new releases. Surely such policies are aimed at increasing visibility, name recognition, and/or visitor volume, targets that should be seen within the context of the recent changes in notions about the appropriation of public funds. Nevertheless, I found that adapting to these changes has led to a reduced archival and museological caliber of the institutes' public activities.

• Despite the huge changes in cinema's *technology* this element of the definition is clearly of minor importance in the public activities of most institutes. Film programs are not seldom a mixture of original and subsequent technologies, while reduction prints or substandard formats (e.g. DVDs) are not eschewed. With precious few exceptions what is lacking at the same time is an account of the use of this or that technology as well as information about the materials' provenance, quality, and other aspects relevant to their screening. Presentations, moreover, are underused as opportunities to reflect on 'backstage' activities, such as preservation, restoration, and/or digitization.

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[4] Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Francis, Alexander Horwath, Michael Loebenstein (eds.), *Film curatorship: archives, museums, and the digital marketplace (*Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum – Synema, 2008), p. 231 (my italics).

[5] A term borrowed from: Stanley Fish, *Is there a text in this class?: the authority of interpretive communities* (Cambridge, MA – London: Harvard University Press, 1980).

[6] Of the 1,170 titles screened in the surveyed institutes (actually the number is higher, as the National Film Center, Tokyo, didn't list individual titles) 306 titles, or over 25%, were made during the current decade, i.e. between 2010 and early 2014. And when the figures for the last decade and a half are combined, its proportion rises to 489 titles, or almost 43%. In contrast, early cinema accounted for 0.5% (or 6 titles).

• The notion of film as an *aesthetic* object dominates public activities. This is borne out by the specific range of materials presented, most particularly in film screenings, and the ubiquitous format of the retrospective. Although analogous to retrospective exhibitions in art museums, comparable ambitions of film heritage institutes—overview of an oeuvre, comparison of works, artistic development, etc.—are obstructed by specific film archival practices (e.g. relatively small time frame; restricted number of projections). Furthermore, visitor information is effectively aimed at cinephiles, as it hinders visitors with limited leisure time from making well-considered choices. Finally, many institutes are definitely unmodern insofar as their idea of aesthetics is traditional, if not timeworn, rather than being based on any state-of-the-art ideas developed in the academe or in self-initiated research. Cinema history is basically seen in terms of production categories (crew or cast, genre, studio, nationality) and is implicitly promoted as a universal language disengaged from any historical and local circumstance (e.g. language, censorship, marketing, publicity, programming, venue) that affected material and contextual aspects and, therefore, reception of a film at a specific time and place. Such an approach, in other words, has no relation whatsoever to the very objects, and the traces history has left on them, that film heritage institutes manage. Films in particular are regarded as disembodied objects.

My conclusions are programmatic. That is to say that they are formulated from an insider's perspective and aimed at ameliorating the observed deficiencies in the performance of public accountability of film heritage institutes. These deficiences can be summarized as follows:

• restriction to a relatively narrow repertoire, which in many cases is obtained from outside sources, rather than presentations from the wealth of materials film heritage institutes hold[7]

• the lack of up-to-date film - and other historical, contextual information

• giving low priority to sharing with the public the full range of a country's or region's film heritage and expertise about it

With regard to the public, I call this a state of shared poverty; with regard to the institutes' mandates, their authority to perform their public responsibilities is at stake here.

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[7] Surely, thanks to digital technologies less current materials have become more visible, but this appears not to have brought any fundamental change with regard to providing relevant contextual knowledge nor significantly shifted the 'weight' of repertorial presentations.

I therefore propose that film heritage institutes turn to archival science for guidance. Even though film materials require specific ways of storage and handling, there are no insurmountable differences here from those of other archival practices. If nothing else, the digital convergence and the challenges digital technologies entailed have brought them closer than each may have been aware of or be willing to acknowledge. Moreover, separation of media is noncurrent in another way: in a number of cases the creation of film heritage institutes can retrospectively be understood as a mere practical measure, a form of outsourcing that obviated "contradictory policies, priorities and methodologies" within one general archival institute.[8] Finally, in accord with its public administrative bias archival science foregrounds activities and concerns as belonging inherently to the democratic process. And even though in less democratically inclined administrations these goals get twisted by overmuch politics or underfunded budgets, at the deepest level they are rooted in the conviction that public governance and the activities public institutes have been mandated to perform should be as open and accountable as possible, in order to enable the public to inform themselves about their own society and its histories.

I see the performance of accountability as a crucial element of the reciprocal relation between the public and what sociologist Anthony Giddens has called *expert systems* (of which I consider film heritage institutes an instance, albeit a minor one)[9], or, put differently, as a return in kind for the trust and funding conferred upon them. My insistence on democracy and accountability originates in the belief that many film heritage institutes have not exploited their opportunities and realized their full public potential. Their gatekeeper function has atrophied in their retreat to a narrow repertoire of materials and topics, thereby obstructing the dissemination of full accounts of film heritage to a wider public.[10] Or, to recall another of Giddens's terms, they

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[8] Eric Ketelaar, 'Exploitation of new archival materials', in: *The archival image: collected essays* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1997), p. 78 (orig. publ. in 1988).

[9] Giddens defines an *expert systems* as impersonal "systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of the material and social environment in which we live today"; see his: *The consequences of modernity* (Cambridge – Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013 [1990]), p. 27.

[10] "[A] gatekeeper filters products (or people) as they enter or leave a system."; see: Victoria Alexander, *Sociology of the arts: exploring fine and popular forms* (Malden, MA – Oxford – Carlton: Blackwell, 2011 [2003]), p. 76

inhibit *reflexivity* by withholding up-to-date information from feeding into opinion formation and social practices.[11] Surely, reflective considerations do not necessarily come from archival or academic sources only; they are also offered through educational settings or media popularizations, as well as in all sorts of discourses that percolate down through plain, everyday conversations. It is only because most people have at least a basic, internalized knowledge of, say, the law, health hazards or any other issues in their daily lives that such expert systems can gain in relevance—film archivy has not reached that stage yet. The best bet for film heritage institutes to distinguish themselves and gain the public's trust is to play the heritage card and base their avowed expertise more emphatically on their collections. Here, then, in the display of the wealth of their materials and the dissemination of their wealth of histories is located the responsibility to fulfill their public mandate. Here is located the main gate through which they can show they are an expert system.

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[11] Giddens (2013), p. 38.