

The Latin American Video Archives (L.A.V.A.)

Helping a small video archive to develop a preservation plan

The information we receive about our southern neighbors is almost exclusively gathered by U.S. journalists or scholars. As a result, our ideas and opinions about Latin America are shaped by our own cultural, political and economic perspectives
Karen Ranucci

The Latin American Video Archives (LAVA) is a non-profit organization dedicated to the distribution and dissemination of Latin American and U.S. Latino video to educational institutions in the United States and Canada.

It is not primarily an archive but a small distribution company for the educational market. Nevertheless, collecting and giving access to Latin American film and video was part of the original mission of International Media Resource Exchange (I.M.R.E.), LAVA's parent organization, whose scope was wider and aimed to provide technological, financial and production assistance to Latin American filmmakers and video artists. Karen Ranucci, a free-lance producer and a specialist in alternative uses of video by community groups and independent producers in Latin America, founded I.M.R.E in 1987.

L.A.V.A.'s video collection grew over the years as a result of both an active policy of acquisitions (by donation or as part of the distribution contract) and a "passive" reception of tapes from filmmakers, producers, or scholars who wanted their works to be part of L.A.V.A.

I.M.R.E. and Karen Ranucci

Karen Ranucci worked as an independent journalist and freelanced for NBC's Nightly News and Today Show. She was an assistant to Jon Alpert for several PBS documentaries. She is also the founder and director of International Media Resource Exchange (IMRE), a non-profit organization whose mission was to "respond to the growing desire of alternative media makers and users of around the world to have more direct contact with each other". IMRE, a special project of the Foundation of Independent Video and Filmmakers, was intended as a resource center to provide a variety of services and facilitate the collection, distribution, and use of independent media made by Third World producers, particularly those of Latin America.

Working with the Foundation of Independent Video and Filmmakers, Ranucci created a database and published a directory of film and video production resources in Latin America.

The Latin American Video Archive (LAVA) project started in 1987 at Ramapo College in New Jersey when Ranucci was a member of the media and communications faculty in the School of Contemporary Arts. Its goal was to incorporate "popular" videotape produced by community groups in Latin America into various disciplines. Ramapo purchased thirty hours of tapes produced by native Latin American communities and created its own on-campus Latin American archive accessible to students and faculty. Funding for IMRE and LAVA came from grants given by the Rockefeller Foundation and NYSCA (New York State Council on the Arts)

Given that IMRE and LAVA were Karen Ranucci's personal projects, she carried them on when she moved to New York, where she continued her efforts to give technical and financial support to Latin American video and filmmakers and producers.

In 2001, Karen Ranucci decided to leave Lava's management¹ to Roselly Torres, a graduate from NYU Cinema Studies program, who, with the help of Michelle Guanca, a graduate from NYU Latin American Studies Program, took the task of keeping the organization alive.

L.A.V.A. underwent many changes during these last years. Both Torres and Guanca learnt from the resourcefulness and dynamism of Ranucci and decided to continue her hard work providing the organization some new organizational parameters and a much-needed long-range preservation plan. As every other magnetic tape archive, they face the challenges of format obsolescence and migration. In addition, they face a bigger challenge as I.M.R.E.'s board members have told them that they have to move to new facilities in 2006. Therefore, they are gathering information regarding storage, transportation and handling of magnetic tapes in order to make be well prepared for the change.

Significance of L.A.V.A. collection: U.S access to Latin American audiovisual works

For most underdeveloped countries' audiovisual production, the world market offers significant opportunity (given its power to legitimize artistic values and the financial benefits that it implies) but "one that is sharply asymmetric in terms of competitive possibilities, given their enormous inequalities in comparison with developed countries when it comes to technological, financial, and promotional capacity"².

¹ She is now Development director at Democracy Now!, a national, daily, independent news program airing on over 300 stations in North America.

² *Cultural Industries in the Latin American Economy: Current Status and Outlook in the Context of Globalization*, Office of Cultural Affairs/Oficina de Asuntos Culturales OAS/OEA, http://www.oas.org/culture/series6_f.html

In terms of exportation, the U.S. is increasingly a difficult and hostile market for foreign films. Recent theatrical exhibition of Latin American films that received multiple international awards, such as the Argentine **Mundo Grúa** (*Crane World*, Pablo Trapero, 1999), the Mexican **Santitos** (Alejandro Springall, 1999) and the Cuban **La vida es silbar** (*Life Is to Whistle*, Fernando Pérez, 1998) had disappointing results in the New York City theatres; none of these films were booked to play for longer than a week. Large-scale distribution in the U.S. is now a rare achievement. In *Variety's* list of the 50 all-time top foreign films distributed in North America, only two Latin American films make it: the Mexican **Como agua para chocolate** (*Like Water for Chocolate*, Alfonso Arau, 1992) (#3) and the Brazilian **Central do Brasil** (*Central Station*, Walter Salles, 1998) (#40).

Only five percent of Latin American films succeed in getting released in other countries, and this normally happens only when they have been awarded an international prize. Unfortunately, festivals are currently the only viable alternative for both commercial and "art house" movies from Latin America to exhibit and enter the North American market.

Within this context, an archive like L.A.V.A. can facilitate intellectual and cultural dialogue and help "change the imbalance by facilitating South-North media exchanges"³. The organization has one of the largest collections of Latin American and U.S Latino made video and film (on video) in the United States. The collection includes many materials that are unavailable elsewhere in the U.S.

L.A.V.A is an important source for both film and video made in Latin America or about Latin American issues. As its mission statement indicates, "the ordinary course of

³ L.A.V.A.'s mission statement.

contemporary international communications flows from developed countries to developing countries and rarely the other way round". It is not easy for people in the U.S. to have the opportunity to learn what people in Latin America have to say about their own reality. Most audiovisual production coming from Latin America is mostly inaccessible to U.S. audiences and part of L.A.V.A's mission is to expose American audiences to an international viewpoint and to the multicultural dimensions of their lives.

The archive is open to the public free of charge for on-site viewing. This video library is an invaluable resource for students, professors, researchers, journalists, festival curators, television programmers, and anyone interested in Latin American cinema.

It is very important to emphasize the fact that LAVA grants free viewing access to any member of the community who is interested in watching these tapes for any reason. There are other archives that collect Latin American related audiovisual material, but these are generally associated to University libraries and are therefore restricted to scholars and students. LAVA is open to the general public.

L.A.V.A's activities

LAVA has developed three ongoing projects that form the backbone of the organization's activities: a distribution service, a website, and an archive.

- Distribution: their catalogue includes seminal works by award-winning producers that represent the diversity of Latin American and Latino culture. LAVA represents over 300 titles otherwise not available in the United States and Canada. They work with the educational market including universities, museums, libraries, and cultural organizations. Their titles

have been screened at festivals around the world and several have been sold to the broadcast market in the United States.

- Website: LAVA's website contains a searchable database of Latin American cinema with over 8,000 titles. This database not only lists the majority of films produced in or about Latin America, but also indicates which of those titles are available for purchase in the United States. Uniting the Latin American collections of other distributors into one central location, the website serves as an ordering outlet where all of these titles can be purchased.
- Archive: L.A.V.A. houses over 3,000 Latin American and Latino titles.
- L.A.V.A. also offers tape dubbing and transfer services for independent filmmakers. They can transfer from or to BetacamSP, miniDV, DVCam, DVD, and VHS.

A modest proposition: a preservation plan for L.A.V.A

Although magnetic tape is a fragile and unstable medium for preserving audiovisual material, proper storage in reasonable archival conditions can provide a shelf life of over 50 years. The main archival problems with magnetic tape are instability of the binder with some types of tapes, and the rapid obsolescence of formats and equipment. Therefore, it is imperative for a video archive to establish a long-range preservation plan to take appropriate care of the magnetic tape material in their facility. Migration to a contemporary new medium or to a new tape format must be considered an element of all long-term archival plans.

At present, L.A.V.A doesn't have a preservation program plan or a disaster response plan.

Some facts about magnetic tapes.

Magnetic tape is not considered a good long-term storage medium for archival material. In fact, there is no good archival medium for the long-term storage of video. The archivist is therefore faced with the problems of maintaining obsolete equipment and having to migrate (copy or transfer) material to a newer tape format or a different type of medium

The preferred preservation format is Betacam SP. It's a preferred analog choice because it is still widely used, it is not likely to be discontinued soon, and repair and replacement are likely to be available.

Videotape is composed of magnetic particles (metal oxides) incorporated into a binder layer on a polyester base, or a thin magnetic film deposited on a polyester base without a binder. The metal oxide particles store or record the signals, and the binder layer keeps the particles where they belong. The binder layer may hydrolyze (a chemical reaction that renders the binder soft or sticky) over time or it may lose its integrity and begin to flake off, leading to loss of information as the magnetic particles are lost. Videotapes in this condition will not play properly because they clog VCR heads. Uneven winding from recording or playback can damage the polyester base; this results in tracking problems when the tape is played.

All three tape components –magnetic particle, binder, and backing- are potential sources of failure for a magnetic tape medium

In addition to the previously described problems inherent to magnetic tape, other types of problems –shared by all archival materials- stem from mishandling, improper storage, malfunctioning equipment, or natural disaster.

The most common causes of damage are improper handling and extremes or fluctuations in heat and humidity. Dust and debris that are trapped between the layers of wound tape or accumulate in the equipment can also result in damage. Magnetic fields (from televisions, speakers, magnets, vacuum cleaners, etc.) are a problem only if they are strong and close to the tape.

Taking care of playback machines is also very important: dirty machines can ruin tape by distributing debris across the surface of the tap, produce poor tape packs, and write poorly placed tracks. Machines that are poorly aligned electrically can cause signal problems that will result in inferior playback. It is a good idea to follow manufacturer's instructions for good recorder maintenance in order to protect recordings.

Tapes should be stored in plastic video tape storage boxes of inert polypropylene or polyethylene. Cardboard sleeves in which tapes are delivered from the manufacturer should be removed and discarded.

Tapes should be stored in a *vertical*, not horizontal, position and should be rewound least once a year on a rewinding device rather than a video tape player. Some experts also suggest that, once a year, master tapes should be wound onto the tape's other hub and stored that way for the remaining year or until used.

Tapes should be stored away from heat. They should never be laid on top or near the transformers of VCRs, televisions or audio receivers. These devices emit magnetic fields that can damage magnetic media.

Labels should be affixed to both the tape cassette and storage box. They should designate all pertinent information (date, tape number, title, etc.). It's important to use brand labels that come with the cassettes in order to keep consistent track of technical specifications.

Master video tapes should be maintained in a regulated climate zone. Recommended temperatures should be no greater than 65 degrees Fahrenheit (17°C) and relative humidity should be between 35% and 45%, with fluctuations no greater than plus or minus 5%. Air filtration systems are also recommended to remove particulates and other contaminants. These systems should also be capable of removing oxidants including peroxides and automobile emissions, which damage video tapes.

L.A.V.A. archival facilities

LAVA houses more than 4000 thousand videotapes in a variety of formats, including Betacam Sp (446 masters), ¾" U-Matic (630), VHS (3000), MiniDV (22) and DVD (34). The Masters for distribution are mostly Betacam SP and a few MiniDV, the sub masters for making copies to sell are ¾" U-Matic and the access copies for in-house viewing are VHS.

LAVA is located in the basement of Karen Ranucci's home in Greenwich Village. It occupies three rooms, a bathroom, and a corridor. The two main rooms serve as

storage space, administrative offices, editing, and dubbing room. There is also a smaller viewing room, which also serves as storage space (see floor plan).

Tapes are stored in wooden shelves in all four rooms (in both plastic and cardboard covers). There is no separate space for tape storage, administrative workplace, paper based documents storage, and equipment for editing and viewing.

There are two windows looking on to the street. The first room has an air conditioner (fixed at 70° but not constantly).

Masters, sub masters and access copies are shelved separately. Betacam masters occupy the shelf right next to the air conditioner and besides a window.

Each tape has an accession number stating its format, shelving location and country of origin. Within each format category, the collection is broken into different sections according for the most part to country of origin. Except for the non Latin American titles, which are classified according to the Latin American country they deal with. If they deal with more than one country, they rely on common sense to classify them within a single country category.

Equipment:

L.A.V.A. has editing equipment (an “AVID wannabe called EDIT”) which they use it for subtitling and making compilation tapes.

They have eight VCRs, 1 U-Matic playback machine, 1 DVD player, 1 Betacam SP player, and a DV Cam/Mini DV. They do all dubbing and transfers in-house.

Staff:

Roselly Torres and Michelle Guanca are the only full-time staff and they are responsible for the administration and management of the organization. They have a

part-time employee who writes the newsletter and catalog reviews. They also have an internship program to work on different tasks.

L.A.V.A decision-making process involves developing acquisitions, curatorial and marketing policies. They make and keep contact with filmmakers and producers all over Latin America, they deal with contracts and legal issues, they produce transfers, and selling copies and they promote, sell, and distribute their titles.

They also work with film festivals, universities, and community centers.

Collection highlights and special collections:

L.A.V.A holds many invaluable items, some of them not available in video format (and sometimes in any other format) in the U.S...

Because of their special value, it is worth mentioning the Cuban collection (a number of 35mm Betacam transfers of hard-to-find Cuban feature films, made on-site in ICAIC, La Habana), the INCINE collection (a series of television newsreels and public service documentaries from Nicaragua's Sandinista revolution), the Video in the Villages collection (a series of video works produced by indigenous video makers from Brazil) and the Bolivian video-documentaries collection.

L.A.V.A also distributes the only subtitled version available in U.S of Argentine filmmaker Fernando Birri's **Los inundados** (1959) and **Tire Dié** (1958).

Roselly and Michelle also carry out an excellent curatorial work, organizing their collection into topic-arranged sub collections. They use their expertise in Latin American cinema to classify each film into useful and imaginative categories, such as African Diaspora, Jewish Diaspora, Crossing Borders, Human Rights, Women's studies, Politics and History or Sports.

Copyright issues:

LAVA keeps good track of legal and copyright issues of the material they distribute. They don't hold any legal rights for their material in the VHS collection, although they used to include in their distribution contract a clause asking the filmmakers a copy for archival purposes. The rest of the material, which they receive as informal donation, they record from U.S. or Latin American T.V., they buy in

As part of the changes toward a less personal and more "professional" environment, they made some changes to their distribution contracts. They used to sign a contract that granted non-exclusive right to distribute the tape to educational markets in U.S., its territories and possessions (including Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands) and Canada. The agreement remained in effect until either party cancelled it with a 30 day written notice. LAVA was allowed to sell the videotape in the educational market (universities, libraries, museums), excluding home video and charge 150\$. LAVA agreed to remit 50% of all gross revenues earned from the sale of the videotape. This remission was made twice a year (in January and July).

The filmmaker/producer agreed to provide the best NTSC Betacam SP, ¾", DVCAM, or Mini DV master (or VHS NTSC copies of the videotape if the master is unavailable) for dubbing purposes. LAVA should publicize the video in its electronic newsletter, list the video on its website and include the video in its annual catalog, send time-coded screeners to appropriate educational institutions, organizations, associations, or related entities solely for promotional purposes. They are not able to carry or authorize others to carry any alterations, edits, or additions to the film without

prior consent of the filmmakers. LAVA also reserves the right to use up to 5 minutes of the film for promotional purposes.

The new contract limits the effect of the contract to 4 years, renewed automatically and it makes those rights exclusive. It also includes film festivals and doesn't specify U.S. and Canada territorial validity effectiveness, but instead mentions that excluded territories should be clarified in each contract. If L.A.V.A. creates a subtitled version, the filmmaker/producer doesn't have the right to end the 4-year term.

It also changes the percentage of revenues paid to filmmakers from 50% to 40%.

They no longer have a clause authorizing LAVA to keep an archival access VHS copy. I think that it could be a good idea to include that clause again in their contracts, because it gives them some legal standpoint for their collection.

In any case, since they provide on-site access free of charge, it could be argued that their use of the "illegal" copies they hold in their collection could be considered fair use.

A practicable preservation plan

Preservation broadly comprises those activities and functions designed to produce a suitable and safe environment that extends the useful life of collections. It includes securing the funds for preservation activities, security, and disaster alertness, as well as conservation, restoration, inspection and documentation.

Given the present and upcoming challenges L.A.V.A. has to confront, it would be beneficial and reasonable for them to think of a preservation plan in two stages:

- 1- Some urgent things they can do right now at their present facilities.

2-Other things they can aim at, regarding the fact that they have to move next year.

Phase 1:

- 1- Risk assessment and prioritization scheme.
- 2- Improve environmental conditions: try to stabilize temperature; monitor conditions and keep track of temperature and relative humidity on a regular basis.
- 3- Cataloging: consider IMAP template.
- 4- Start a new access number system.
- 5- Remove cardboard slipcovers.
- 6- Move the Masters tapes from besides the air conditioner and the window.
- 7- Separate working space from the collection shelves.
- 8- Try not to eat or drink near the tapes.
- 9- Sample tape inspection and rewinding schedule.
- 10-Dub Betacam masters.
- 11-Stock on VCRs and VHS tapes.
- 12- New items: keep track of provenance. /. have a tape and documentation inspection routine
- 13-Make sure all tapes can be played back

Phase 2:

- 1- Long-range preservation plan
- 2- Natural disaster plan.

- 3- Insurance
- 4- Climate controlled storage.
- 5- Regular tape inspection schedule.
- 6- Plan on start collecting DVDs and migrating the most valuable VHS to DVD or other digital format.
- 7- Digitizing plan for their Betacam Masters. Start collecting digital masters.
- 8- Paper-based documentation preservation plan.

Some specifics

Masters and originals are the most valuable part of the collection. The collection should contain: user copies, masters in original format, duplicate master in contemporary format.

In an ideal situation, they should have two preservation masters, stored in different locations, not to be touched except to create sub masters.

They should save playback equipment, whether it works or not, and also save manuals and training materials. They should keep contact information for engineers and vendors. They should stock up on critical spare parts and spare recorders.

Most importantly, they should determine a prioritization scheme, detecting which of their tapes are in a higher risk of deterioration. A simple but useful starting point can be found in this table:

- High risk: U-Matic 1981-1986/ VHS more than 10 years old
- Medium risk: $\frac{3}{4}$ U-Matic 1987 and later, VHS and Betacam SP 1986-1990

- Lower risk: Digital formats, all other tapes 1990 onwards.

They should also start thinking about VHS obsolescence and maybe buy a couple of high quality VCRs and high quality tapes.

Climate controlled storage:

Tapes should be kept in a cool, relatively dry environment. In general, experts agree that tapes should be stored at 60-73° F / 20-30% RH. It is very important to avoid fluctuations (a range of no more than 7°F and plus or minus 5%RH. In fact, recent research revealed that stability of environmental conditions is more important than low temperature and low RH. That is why it is critical to monitor storage environment and set up a regular schedule for logging the information.

It is also recommended that tapes and equipment should be allowed to come to ambient room temperature before playing them back.

When looking for a new location, they should consider dedicating a room only to storage, avoid attics and cellars, avoid areas near heating, plumbing, or sprinkler systems, avoid lower floors (prone to flooding), keep away from direct sunlight (prefer a windowless room) and ensure the room is free of dust, with no carpet or fabric. Staff should be told to turn the light off when the room is not in use.

The storage room should have good air circulation and ideally, air should be filtered. No smoking, eating or drinking should be allowed in the storage room, the viewing room, and the subtitling/dubbing room.

Tapes should be stored in plastic polypropylene cases (not cardboard -vulnerable to water and fire) and no paper should be placed inside the cases.

Shelving:

Tapes should be stored in grounded metal shelves. Wood should be avoided because it is not fireproof, holds moisture, emit gases, and provides a medium for fungus growth.

Tapes should be stored in the upright position. It is important to allow for air circulation around shelving.

In an ideal storage situation, duplicate tapes and high quality masters should be stored in different rooms.

Tape inspection and documentation:

Examination involves physically inspecting the tapes and tape containers and/or actually playing the tapes. Examination should include checking documentation that identifies the material recorded on the tape and ensuring that labels and file material agree.

Every archive should have an examination/documentation plan for all incoming tapes.

Handling and care:

It's important to protect tapes against accidental erasure by removing record tabs and to avoid contamination of tape surface. After use, tape should be rewound to the end.

It is also recommended to periodically rewind tapes to minimize uneven wind and stretching. It's a good idea to consider a regular schedule for rewinding.

It's also advisable to use high quality brand name tapes for copying and remastering, to label minimally and with proper materials (make sure that the labels that

come with the tapes are used). There are also archival labels (non-acid, adhere without peeling off) that could be considered

Cataloging:

I think the IMAP Cataloging Template⁴ would be a helpful alternative for them, since it is specifically designed for small institutions with no cataloging training. Standardization would make them be able to be part of MIC and make their archive more visible and accessible to more users.

Their current database needs some fine-tuning to include some new fields, mainly regarding provenance, physical inspection data, and possibly a new accession number system with separate shelving location numbers.

Currently, they have different numbers for Betacam masters, U-Matic sub masters, and VHS access copies. Within each format collection, each country has its own particular sub numbers. This might not seem the best idea, because they lose track of the date of arrival of each cassette. They don't keep track of that anywhere in the database.

This system of country numbering also raises the issue of those works that are difficult to put under a definite "country" category: such as co productions, orphan films, TV films made for a specific country, produced by multinational corporations etc.

Disaster plan:

They should consider contracting an insurance plan for the collection.

⁴ Independent Media Arts Preservation (IMAP) is distributing a MARC-compatible cataloging template that was developed by cataloger Jim Hubbard, as part of the Regional Cataloging Project of Media Alliance. Henry Mattoon of the National Moving Image Database (NAMID) at the American Film Institute bases the template upon a design; former NAMID Director Margaret Byrne initiated the design. In the early 1990's, NAMID assisted a number of media arts groups to do initial catalogs, including Video Data Bank, Electronic Arts Intermix, Anthology Film Archives, the Experimental TV Center, and the Kitchen.

Fires, flooding, leaking, and pests are exceptional and unfortunate occurrences, but every archive should be prepared to deal with disaster.

Fire suppression: the experts recommend a fire and smoke detection system with two different temperature sensors. One set of temperature sensors should be set at the temperature required by the local fire code, the other set to a lower temperature. A fire will trigger the lower temperature sensor, which will set off a local alarm but not turn on the sprinklers. If the fire is stopped before one of the higher temperature sensors are triggered, no water will damage any tapes.

Fungus: it is usually very difficult to remove all of the fungus on tapes so it is advisable to have fungus decontamination done by a professional. To prevent fungal growth, tapes must be stored in an environment less than 50 % RH and the room air should circulate. Every tape in the vault should be exposed to at least some degree of circulating air.

Water: Any tapes that have been soaked in water should be submerged in cold water until someone who knows how to dry them properly can dry them. The water can be kept cold by adding ice or by placing the container in a refrigerator (not a freezer). It is also recommended to keep mops, gloves, buckets, apron, and plastic sheeting to cover shelves in case of a flood

Exposure to dampness: If the tapes have been exposed to moisture but water did not actually contact the tape, then they should be kept in a cool and dry area for a few days (not hot and dry). The cool, dry environment will counter the effect of any hydrolysis that occurred.

Magnetic Fields: Only very large fields can affect the signal on the tape and such a large field is not very common. The field a few inches from a large motor or transformer is so small that it will not affect a magnetic recording.

Draft conclusions (or a little oasis in the desert)

It might be easy to underestimate the importance of a project like L.A.V.A. They are a small archive, they hold no originals, their collection is mainly VHS, and they deal with a “low-profile” subject (Latin American and U.S. Latino audiovisual productions). But their continuous work throughout the years has secured them a moderate but sound prestige. As I was able to confirm, L.A.V.A has had a persistent and pervasive influence within the community of scholars, journalists, teachers, filmmakers, producers and other audiovisual professionals interested in Latin American art, politics or culture. Only a minimal interest in any particular work or filmmaker or topic is necessary to be confronted with the difficulties of finding and having access to the tapes anywhere in the United States. In addition, more than often, if you find what you are looking for, its access is restricted to scholars, members of a particular faculty or students. That’s when L.A.V.A. comes to the rescue. Because although as a distribution company, they cater to the educational community, as an archive their scope is larger. Their work increases the visibility of an important cultural production that contributes significantly to the enrichment of world culture. In an unpretentious but effective way, I think L.A.V.A has played a part in making Latin American audiovisual productions available to American audiences. Cultural diversity is a “common heritage of humanity” and I think its safeguarding is a critical ethical imperative within the context of a “globalized” world where diversity and cultural identity are threatened by homogenization practices.

Greater and easier access to information and cultural products of other cultures result in a better understanding of global issues and of the increasingly interdependent nature of the world.

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