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 Access to Moving Image Collections
 CINE-GT 1803
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 18 October 2012

Collections Access: A Comparative Analysis of AFA & PFA

Anthology Film Archives and the Pacific Film Archives sprouted from similar philosophical origins over four decades ago, opening their doors on opposite coasts within two years of each other. While they share many of the same principles regarding the importance of film preservation and public access, there are clear differences setting them apart in their current systems of physical, virtual, and intellectual access. This paper will discuss the user experience at each of these institutions in regard to the aforementioned approaches to access, offering a comparative analysis of the pros and cons to their respective frameworks.

Anthology Film Archives

“Anthology Film Archives is the first film museum exclusively devoted to the film as an art.” – P. Adams Sitney¹

Anthology Film Archives is a non-profit archival institution founded by Jonas Mekas, Jerome Hill, P. Adams Sitney, Peter Kubelka, and Stan Brakhage, a group of underground filmmakers and enthusiasts, “dedicated to the vision of the art of cinema as guided by the avant-garde sensibility”.² Since its inception in 1969, AFA has served as a bastion of underground and experimental cinema, transforming a modest repertory collection of *Essential Cinema*³ films into an archive with 900 annual screenings, 800 films preserved, 330 *Essential Cinema* films, an immense moving image collection, and “the world’s largest collection of paper materials relating to independent and

¹ Anthology Film Archives, *About / Manifesto*, <http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/about/manifesto> (Dec. 1, 1970).

² Anthology Film Archives, *About / History*, <http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/about/history>

³ *Essential Cinema Repertory Collection* describes the initial goal of the AFA founders to identify and maintain an archive of films that, in their opinion, defined and described film as an experimental art form: “An ambitious attempt to define the art of cinema by means of a selection of films which would screen continuously, the Essential Cinema collection was intended to encourage the study of the medium’s masterworks as works of art rather than disposable entertainment.” Anthology Film Archives, *About / Overview*, <http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/about/about> .

experimental cinema, encompassing books, periodicals, documents, letters, manuscripts, and more”.⁴ Access to this formidable collection is primarily granted through daily public screenings in their two on-site theaters as well as through private appointments for research purposes.

Given that AFA is an operational archive rather than a public or academic library, its vaults are closed to the public and access is exclusively granted on premise by appointment. Though the theaters open to the public each day for multiple film screenings, private film viewing and handling of print media are generally reserved for research purposes. Those looking to gain access to portions of the collection are required to submit a request 7 days in advance with specific film titles for the audiovisual archivist and a detailed research plan for the librarian so that relevant documents can be gathered and prepared. Given the fragile nature of film and the limited number of prints, digital access copies are provided to the researcher for viewing on a monitor. While AFA maintains a philosophy of remaining true to the visual integrity of the original medium, films are generally only projected for research purposes if an access projection print is available and if the nature of the research requires the original format. For these cases, AFA has two theaters as well as a 16mm Steenbeck viewer for close-analysis. Access to printed materials is limited to two days per week by appointment and requires a small fee of \$20/day. Xerox copies of periodical materials can also be requested and sent via mail.

Virtual access at AFA is currently in development. The AFA website, though easily navigated, is lacking in collection content and limited in user-driven search-ability. The collections are described under four headings: *Film/Video*, *Books/Paper Materials*, *Stills*, and *Audio*. As of now, the film/video & audio sections are limited, offering only a synecdochical glimpse into their overall video and audio collection. A digital catalog of film, video, and audio is not currently available, with the exception of a partial list of the over 800 films AFA has preserved. This virtual shortcoming has problematic implications for physical access as well. Without a catalog of archival holdings to reference, how can a potential researcher determine whether or not the institution owns an access copy of a particular film, or furthermore, how can s/he explore related works within the archive that

⁴ Anthology Film Archives, *Collections / Overview*
<http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/collections/collections-landing> .

might be beneficial to the expansion of research? In this case, the archivist must be contacted for information regarding their collections.

In contrast to the available information in the film/video and audio sections are the virtual offerings of the books/paper materials and stills areas. Though textual materials are not offered in digital form, there is an extensive alphabetical catalog describing each periodical [journal title and year(s)] available in the archive. The one issue with this list is that no table of contents for each periodical is available, meaning that external research or consultation with the librarian is necessary to determine the relevancy of a given periodical to one's research. Their digital stills collection is easily the most developed and accessible portion on the AFA website, offering several hundred images from their 4000 unit collection. The stills are searchable by film title, filmmaker, and keyword search, and each image is described with the basic metadata: author/auteur, title, date, file name, and copyright information.

Perhaps the area with the most readily available descriptive metadata is the AFA screening section, listing current quarterly programming and past programming up to the relatively recent past. Each film is described by title, filmmaker, date/time of exhibition, date of production, length in minutes, format of screener copy, series, description of narrative/contextual background, and links to the particular series overview providing more historical context. A PDF of the physical quarterly catalog is also available for download, and a categorical search is enabled on their digital calendar based on recurring programs [*Essential Cinema, Premiers/Revivals, Retrospectives, Series, Special Screenings, AFA Preservations, Festivals, & New Filmmakers*].

Though virtual access at AFA is still clearly a work in progress, they indicate that they are gradually digitizing the contents of their archive for the purpose of expanded access: "With these new digital initiatives, Anthology hopes to establish a second source for our collections to be seen by the public. By hosting digital content on our website we hope to satisfy the demand of current Anthology members while at the same time introducing a new audience to independent and avant-garde cinema."⁵

⁵ Anthology Film Archives, *Collections: Film/Video*, <http://anthologyfilmarchives.org/collections/film-video>.

Pacific Film Archive at UC Berkeley

*“The mission of the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive is to inspire the imagination and ignite critical dialogue through art and film.”*⁶

Founded in 1971 by Sheldon Renan, the Pacific Film Archives has metamorphosed from its grass-roots origins to become a world-renowned archival institution modeled after the Cinémathèque Française in Paris.⁷ Specializing in classics and international cinema, PFA boasts a film-related collection of 95,000 print-based documents, 35,000 stills, 14,000 films and videos, 11,000 catalog records, 8,000 books, 7,500 posters, 1,500 audiotapes, 150 journal titles, and 450 annual screenings.⁸

Physical access at PFA is offered in two forms: daily screenings open to the public and private research sessions at their Film Study Center three days a week. While access to print-based documents is available on-site without appointment for a meager fee [\$3 for non-members], screening appointments must be made two weeks in advance at a larger cost [\$25/film or 2 hours of short works for non-members]. PFA offer several methods for viewing including a 10 seat screening room for small film format projection and digital viewing, and two flatbed-viewing machines for 16mm film and 35mm film, respectively.

Virtual access at PFA is well developed, with no less than four distinct search methods offered on its website. The broadest search engine available is the UC Berkeley university-wide library catalog OskiCat, which offers keyword, title, author, and subject based searches in both quick and advanced search modes. Queries can be refined further by limiting the search to source/format type and departmental location. A resource more specific to cinema is PFA’s film-related document search engine, CineFiles, which offers print-based materials associated with films in its collections. The search system is simpler

⁶ UC Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive, *BAM/PFA Mission & History*, <http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/about/mission> .

⁷ Lee Amazonas, *Guerilla Cinematheque Comes of Age: A History of the Pacific Film Archive*, UC Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive, <http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/about/aboutnotedetail.php?Nickname=TXT0010> [Original Source: *Chronicle of the University of California: A Journal of University History* No. 6 (Spring 2004): 147-59.]

⁸ UC Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive, *PFA Library & Film Study Center*, <http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/pfalibrary/> .

than OskiCat, using similar search fields with the added option for browsing by category. CineFiles stands out as distinct from the other search systems in its added educational and Bay-Area specific portals. Educators can search the PFA film/doc database by theme and topic, allowing flexibility and deeper research capability for course planning. Additionally, the Bay-Area Avant-Garde module allows more specified search within PFA's historical collection of local experimental film. Both modules allow search and browse options, creating a research environment capable of supporting both refined and general queries.

PFA also offers a strong online database of their film collection featuring a quick search and browse capability, as well as an "Expert" search option, which simultaneously processes multiple search terms/categories for more prescribed results. Perhaps the most beneficial feature of this database is the "Briefcase" tab, allowing the user to temporarily store findings for later reference. I tested the database using the "by Director" category and the search term "George Kuchar". I was able to locate 36 film/video recordings of his work containing extensive metadata in the catalog entries, including but not limited to: information on the availability of the print, production information and credits, physical description and assessment, copyright status, and a detailed "notes" section describing everything from a plot summary, historical origin, and specific idiosyncrasies of the particular copy. Should a user need to request materials for a private screening, PFA's database makes it easy to independently determine the availability of a given film and in some cases even provide provenance for the particular copy.

The final interesting virtual access feature on the PFA website is their film program database, allowing a user to search 17,000 cataloged records of PFA film screenings since 1979. Aside from the standard search option categories of keyword, title, and director, one can also search for a program based on the film release date, screening date at PFA, film series, and production credits. I searched for William Klein's *The Model Couple*, a film I viewed at PFA several years ago. Through this, I was able to see the precise date I attended the screening [10.10.2009], the accompanying program notes, the series it belonged to, and the general film production information. I was also able to view the information associated with a previous PFA screening of this film 20 years before! Access to this type of catalog is not only immensely interesting, it is also quite

beneficial for researchers attempting to contextualize the exhibition history of a particular film.

Conclusion

AFA is a non-profit organization funded through various grants, institutional sponsorships, and member donations. Operated by a small staff of three archivists and one librarian, and autonomous from a larger governing institution, AFA has fewer resources available to expedite the process of digitization and virtual access. However, this is not to suggest that digitization and improved virtual access are not ongoing projects; their digital archivist has indicated that their catalog and other digitized materials will be available online in Spring 2013. Furthermore, AFA houses one of the largest collections of avant-garde films/videos in the world as well as the largest collection of print materials related to avant-garde cinema, meaning the resources available to the on-site researcher are bountiful and unique, and all for a very minimal service fee. Though their archive and library are closed to the public, AFA clearly demonstrates their dedication to community access through their 900+ annual screenings at what is arguably one the most affordable ticket prices in the city.

In contrast, PFA is an entity within a much larger institutional setting, encompassed by the University of California Berkeley. PFA is not just a research and exhibition center for the everyday cinephile; it is also part of the greater UC Berkeley library system and certainly benefits from this larger umbrella affiliation presiding over it. As a resource for students, faculty, and researchers of the university system, PFA has an obligation to be as up to date as possible in their catalog and search databases in order stay relevant and useful to the collegiate population. Given that it is an academic library as well as an archive, public access is naturally more readily available.

In conclusion, both AFA and PFA boast collections rarely surpassed, and both institutions have maintained an immense impact on the preservation and availability of films that might have otherwise been glanced over, lost, or destroyed. While physical, virtual, and intellectual access to these respective collections is varied in terms of availability, usability, and affordability, due in part to their respective institutional orientations, each archive maintains the principles of democratic access and continues to strive for improvement in these areas.

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