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Access to Moving Image Archives Final

The collection I looked at was the laserdisc collection of a friend and former professor of mine, Roy Frumkes. Back before DVD became the format of choice for everyone, film buff and family alike, laserdisc was a format known for its great expense, limited capacity for content, but lauded for its vastly superior picture and sound quality compared to the then-superior VHS.

A laserdisc itself looks like a cross between a DVD and a vinyl LP. It's a 12" silver disc that can hold a maximum of one hour per side. The disc is read by a laser embedded within the player, hence the name. The picture is analog, but still very impressive on some discs, especially titles mastered by Lucasfilm's THX quality assurance program, such as "Star Wars", "Terminator 2", "The Abyss", and "Strange Days". Audio-wise, the discs could hold a Dolby Surround analog track, and a PCM Stereo digital track. The digital audio used the same codec as CDs, which offered a sampling rate of 1411kbps (compared to a DVD stereo track, usually encoded at 192kbps).

In addition to being a great way to present films, the laserdisc format offered a capacity for extra features. A grand total of four tracks of audio are possible on a laserdisc -analog left and right, digital left and right-, and a filmmaker's audio commentary could be programmed into one or two of these channels. Some discs used this extra audio space to include the film's musical score, or the film's music and sound effects tracks playing without dialogue.

Now there are two types of laserdiscs: CLV, Constant Linear Velocity, which can hold a maximum of one hour per side, and CAV, Constant Angular Velocity, which can hold only 30 minutes per side, but allows for frame-by-frame analysis of the film. CAV was used in elaborate special edition packages. After the movie, you could get a plethora of photographs, production notes, storyboards, essays, and sketches as still frames you could scroll through. A special edition for the cult classic "Akira", based on a six-volume comic book, included the entire first issue of the comic, plus excerpts from the remaining five volumes in still form as

part of its supplements.

Criterion, a boutique DVD and Blu-Ray label, got its start on laserdisc, and some of their more elaborate titles were referred to as 'film school in a box', due to the enormous amount of audio and video supplements some of their titles were given. A single film could cost a staggering \$125 if there were enough discs to be pressed.

In addition, laserdisc was the first home video format to allow for up to 5.1 channels of sound, with a Dolby Digital signal embedded in the analog right track that could be read by a decoder. The resulting sound was lossy, running at only 384kbps, but still impressive for those with early home theater set-ups.

The format died off in the US in 2000, with the last disc pressed being "Bringing Out the Dead". The superior storage capacity (not to mention smaller media size), better picture quality, and lower price of DVD is what killed it.

Like a lot of serious film collectors, Roy had an impressive library of laserdiscs during their golden age (the early to late 90s). His collection is now down to a little over 180 titles, some of them duplicates. He donated a lot of them to the School of Visual Arts' film library, where they are still housed today. He's wanted to know for a while now the value of his collection since he's trying to free up a little space by getting rid of some of them. Some of these discs are quite rare, containing films that have never been made available on DVD, or versions of films only released on the laserdisc format. Some discs, like the Criterion pressings of the James Bond films, contain exclusive extras that can't be found anywhere else, or in some cases, that the studios actually don't want to be redistributed and keep from the public eye.

Roy's collection is quite eclectic, ranging from arthouse classics on the Criterion label like "The Red Shoes", to rare Hong Kong and Japanese discs of exploitation movies like "Doctor Butcher, M.D.". In addition, he owns a few titles on the rarely-used 7" format. This was a format used primarily for promotional discs and some music videos. Because it didn't use any glue to seam together the plastic, is not susceptible to the dreaded 'laser rot' that most laser-read media suffers from when the glue begins to break down.

Its worth noting that in 1987, Roy wrote and produced a cult exploitation film called "Street Trash". He has a personal 35mm print of the film which he has shown many times at repertory screenings that will often sell out. Among the rarest discs in his collection are the German and Japanese LDs of "Street Trash", which both have gone for about \$180 on eBay and LDDDB (The LaserDisc Database) in the past. Oddly enough, the film never had a laserdisc release in the US.

Now I too have a laserdisc collection. Most of the movies I own aren't exactly the rarest of the rare, but there are still a number of titles I cherish, including a few instance where the Laserdisc copy outdoes the DVD (the animated "Batman: Mask of the Phantasm" is a good example; colors are far too saturated on the DVD, and coupled with lossy audio makes for a rather poor presentation – the laserdisc on the other hand has a dynamic and robust soundtrack and well-defined color and brightness).

The three titles I picked from Roy's collection are as follows: the super-rare and highly sought-after Japanese laserdisc of "Song of the South", a Hong Kong import of Zhang Yimou's "Shanghai Triad", and Criterion's special edition of "Sid and Nancy", which is a two-disc set.

The "Song of the South" disc is among the most valuable in Roy's collection. The film itself was made by Walt Disney in 1946 and is a live-action feature with about 25 minutes of animation, plus a few sequences that combine the two mediums. Although it was extremely popular in its day, and saw a re-release in the US as late as 1986, it is an embarrassingly dated film that posits the dreaded 'happy slave' character type with the Uncle Remus character. In the US, the film has *never* seen the light of day on home video officially. In the UK and a couple of other European countries, the film has had a PAL-format VHS release. In Japan, the film got a laserdisc release that is highly sought after by collectors. This release has the film in good picture and sound quality, and although it has Japanese subtitles burned in during the songs, is the best home video presentation of the film anywhere in the world.

"Shanghai Triad" is a Hong Kong-pressed disc of what's considered to be one of Zhang Yimou's lesser efforts. The film was made a few years after "To Live", an excellent, politically-

charged portrayal of a family torn apart by the Cultural Revolution in China. "To Live" was a Chinese production, banned in its own country for depicting a non-idealized version of the Cultural Revolution. Yimou's follow-up was to be a 'non-controversial' gangster movie. The laserdisc release is a Hong Kong import. It presents the film in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1, contains both Mandarin and Cantonese language tracks, as well as burned-in English subtitles. This disc is probably the least valuable of the three, as good DVD releases of the film are widely available.

The final film is Alex Cox's wild biopic on Sid Vicious' relationship with Nancy Spungen, "Sid and Nancy". This is one of the aforementioned Criterion discs; a 2-disc special edition with loads of extra material including a previously unreleased documentary about the Sex Pistols, audio and video interviews with the real Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen, photo essays on concert tours, and an audio commentary by the filmmakers. Although this film is widely available on DVD, the Criterion laserdisc (and its counterpart, a now out-of-print Criterion DVD) remain the only way to see the supplemental features in their full form due to music and image rights. This disc has some value on the collector's market.

For "Song of the South" and "Shanghai Triad", I used the MARC21 schema. On "Sid and Nancy" I used DublinCore. MARC21 is actually of good use to cataloging laserdiscs, as searching for a specific title could yield the desired results. The extra amounts of detail, including the option to list the languages the film is available in and some of the supplements, make for a greater feeling of access to the title.

DublinCore on the other hand is quite limited. Listing out supplements and language are out of the question, and only very basic information can be used. If you were to ask for something using the DublinCore system, you may end up getting the wrong copy of what you're asking for (for instance, there's two pressings of "Shanghai Triad", an American and Hong Kong; what if you wanted the American pressing and didn't know the difference because of the more limited amount of data you were being shown?).

Although laserdisc is a long-dead format, there are still titles in circulation, and titles in demand among educators and collector's alike due to their unique properties. MARC21 offers

a more robust selection of metadata, which would let someone know the difference between several pressings or versions of the same film on the format. The only issue with MARC21's system is that it lists everything under the one heading of 'videorecording' and doesn't get any more specific unless you go to the title proper.