

Intro to MIAP  
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### Small Mouths, Big Bites: The Reality of Small Film Archives Repositories in America

Landfills, dumpsters, incinerators, and even the bottom of the ocean. These are only a few examples of final resting places of many unclaimed films. Among these films, one can find horror, sci-fi, sexploitation, blaxploitation, orphans, home movies, educational films, films on local history, and other rarities that deviate from the Hollywood glitz and therefore are forgotten and badly disposed of. Others are simply forgotten in an attic, left to rot. Small archives in America, such as the American Genre Film Archive, work to rescue these prints from oblivion while others like the Chicago Film Archives work on a film donation basis. Independently of how the films were obtained, these small archives devote their collections to a particular genre or locale, reflecting important elements of history and culture, while dealing with various obstacles and problems, mostly associated with their size. This paper will use the American Genre Film Archive as a case study.

Every archive, large or small, has a story behind it. The American Genre Film Archive (AGFA), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in Austin, Texas, was founded by Tim League (also the founder of Alamo Drafthouse) in 2009 and focuses its “collection around a group of films that have a history of being outside of mainstream film

production and distribution.”<sup>1</sup> With a current collection made out of over six thousand 35mm film prints and trailers, AGFA is considered the largest independent genre and exploitation moving image archive in the world.<sup>2</sup>

AGFA’s history began when Tim League bought several drive-in film prints from a Midwest private film print collector. These prints were screened at the Alamo Drafthouse Theater for a few weeks, but the collecting did not stop there:

Between 2000 and 2009, other genre films were acquired through individual and batch acquisitions by League and film programming associates, Lars Nielsen and Zack Carlson, at the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema. Initially, these films were collected for the express purpose of being exhibited at the Alamo Drafthouse with no official plans for an archive.<sup>3</sup>

Realizing the collection was getting larger by the minute, League got together with a group of film enthusiasts and started the archive. Today, AGFA “counts among its board members and advisors Alamo Drafthouse founders Tim and Karrie League, filmmakers Nicolas Winding Refn and Paul Thomas Anderson, and Austin area film programmers and movie fans”<sup>4</sup> and works intimately with Drafthouse Films (the distribution arm of the Alamo Drafthouse), Fantastic Fest (the largest genre film festival in the United States), and Something Weird (video collection founded by Mike Vraney).

Just like any other archival institution, small archives need to determine the scope of their acquisitions. As previously mentioned, regional archives tend to focus on a particular geographic area. This is not as straightforward as one might think. The

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<sup>1</sup> Kusnierz, Lauren Ashley. “Rebels, Nudie-Cuties, and Hipsters: A Study of the American Genre Film Archive.” The University of Texas, 2014. <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/26549>.

<sup>2</sup> “About AGFA | American Genre Film Archive (AGFA).” *American Genre Film Archive*. Accessed October 8, 2016. <http://americangenefilm.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> Kusnierz, Lauren Ashley. “Rebels, Nudie-Cuties, and Hipsters: A Study of the American Genre Film Archive.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

**Commented [HB1]:** This may or may not be true. Do we trust them to know about collections in Korea, Taiwan, or Hong Kong? In situations like this, its better to say that they claim to be the largest.

institution still needs to define what constitutes its focus and what kind of films and videos fit their collection. A good example of this discussion was posed during one of the meetings of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference (MARAC), where it was debated what states actually constitute the Mid-Atlantic region. In addition to that, regional archives still need to decide if their collections will contain:

[Early] film (fragments, actualities, one- and two-reel dramas, and unidentified bits), industrial films and advertising, educational and training films and videos, artists' works, documentaries, features, experimental and avant-garde pieces, student work, government productions, television news, outtakes, and commercials. It might also include community cablecasts, college and university programming, sports films, and even depositions, security and surveillance, and aerial surveys. Does a regional collection care for film and video made by residents but shot elsewhere? Travel film from adventures outside the region? Productions by itinerant filmmakers? Video games and forms yet unknown?<sup>5</sup>

Other types of small archives define their collections in different ways. AGFA, for example, collects, preserves, and even distributes over six thousand genre movies and trailers, ranging from “manic hicksploitation epics to bloodthirsty shoestring goreblasts”<sup>6</sup> from the 1960s through the 1980s. They do not focus on a specific geographic area or even public demand, working instead with the Something Weird Video collection to make genre films more accessible. According to Joe Ziemba, programmer at the Alamo Drafthouse and volunteer for AGFA, the criteria for picking which films to work with:

For us, it’s mostly about the rarity of the movies. Also, how much they mean to us and how much people will appreciate these movies. A lot of this exploitation stuff from the late ’60s... to us it might be fascinating — a cultural snapshot of the past gone by — but for an audience to actually watch it, it might be kind of difficult. It’s not exactly crowd-pleasing to watch a 60-minute black-and-white movie of

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<sup>5</sup> “Regional Moving Image Archives in the United States - ProQuest Central - ProQuest.” Accessed October 9, 2016. <http://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu:2091/central/docview/222341841/91D3CD0ED9514C45PQ/3?accountid=12768>.

<sup>6</sup> “About AGFA | American Genre Film Archive (AGFA).”

people in their underwear rubbing up against each other. There's not much indelible quality in that, but they're still important. There's an amount of preservation that goes into all of these, no matter what they are. Some of them that are really special and have the power to please many people on many different levels, I think those are the ones that we really focus on. The greatest thing is when we find something completely lost, and it turns out to be amazing.<sup>7</sup>

**Commented [HB3]:** Great that you found this on Flavorwire

Small archives are normally managed by a small staff. For this reason, it is important to set priorities and establish a reasonable workflow when processing items. In fact, if the archive is run by a solo archivist, which means he or she works alone or assisted by a paraprofessional staff, that archivist works as a manager, who “directs the resources of business towards socially, culturally, or economically significant results.”<sup>8</sup> This solo archivist, playfully called “the lone arranger,” needs to keep up with “rapid advances in technology, increasing regulation on institutional records, and exponential growth in the volume and variety of cultural resources being collected [and] find efficient and effective ways to manage their archives.”<sup>9</sup>

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Being the manager of a small archive also requires the archivist to be in tune with changes and the public's needs. According to Peter Drucker's *Theory of Business*, an organization cannot rely on the same beliefs forever. These beliefs, which “shape any organization's behavior, dictate its decisions about what to do and what not to do, and define what the organization considers meaningful results,”<sup>10</sup> need to adapt and shift to

**Commented [HB5]:** and even sources on organizational management

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<sup>7</sup> “The American Genre Film Archive On Why Exploitation Movies Are Worth Preserving.” *Flavorwire*, October 24, 2015. <http://flavorwire.com/544455/the-american-genre-film-archive-on-why-exploitation-movies-are-worth-preserving>.

<sup>8</sup> McFarland, Colleen. “Rethinking the Business of Small Archives.” *Archival Issues*, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> “The Lone Arranger: Succeeding in a Small Repository.” Accessed November 25, 2016. <http://saa.archivists.org/store/the-lone-arranger-succeeding-in-a-small-repository/2526/>.

<sup>10</sup> Drucker, Peter F. “The Theory of the Business.” *Harvard Business Review*, September 1, 1994. <https://hbr.org/1994/09/the-theory-of-the-business>.

better serve the institution itself and the public. As of now, AGFA only has one full-time employee, its head archivist, Sebastian del Castillo, who is helped by a group of volunteers, who, in turn, predominantly work at the Alamo Drafthouse.

One management problem AGFA currently deals with is related to its film inventory. The archive utilizes a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to record the available metadata associated with each print:

The title, format, ownership information (since the AGFA collection stores prints belonging to private collectors), and the location of the print on AGFA shelves are noted. Unfortunately, this spreadsheet does not contain any information about the condition of individual prints, or any information about the films other than the title. Because AGFA acquired many of the films in large batches, AGFA volunteers have not been able to screen every print in the collection. The boxes most prints are stored in are labeled at the time of acquisition, but sometimes this information is spotty or inaccurate.<sup>11</sup>

The lack of metadata in addition to the fact that AGFA does not currently have an online database accessible to researchers and the public, create difficulties during the loaning process. In order for one to request a print from AGFA, he or she needs to be familiar with all the titles available and preferably, their condition, which is not an easy task due to the size of the collection.

In contrast, large archival institutions enjoy more resources and a larger staff. In addition to supplies being more plentiful, tasks are delegated, training is provided, and manuals are available to all staff members, allowing for less confusion and more efficiency in archival procedures. In a way, the supervisor works as a contractor building a house: “the plans are there, the materials are supplied, and the job is to make sure that

**Commented [HB6]:** Amazing that you could find a student Preservation Needs Assessment (and such a thorough one)!

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<sup>11</sup> Brown, Griffin, and John Schooley. “American Genre Film Archive - Preservation Needs Assessment,” March 19, 2012. <http://johnschooley.net/AGFAnedsassessment.pdf>.

the carpenters know where to cut, what to hammer, and when to move on to the next unit.”<sup>12</sup>

Space can also be a tricky thing for small archives. Ideally, an archive should have:

- A fire-resistant environment, with fire extinguishers and smoke and heat detectors.
- An area free from possible flooding or water damage, above the basement or ground level if possible. All archival materials should be on shelves and off the floor.
- An area free of insects, rodents, mould, or fungus. It is important to have a specialist inspect the archives and suggest controls that are not harmful to the staff’s health or the collection.
- An area with consistent temperature and humidity. One should monitor and record the heat and humidity regularly and check materials periodically for any change in their condition. A dehumidifier or air conditioner can be used to control the temperature if necessary.
- An area with little uncontrolled natural or fluorescent light. Curtains, shades, light filters, or incandescent lights, should be used or materials can be stored on the north side of a building.

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<sup>12</sup> Dearstyne, Bruce William. *Leadership and Administration of Successful Archival Programs*. Greenwood Library Management Collection. Accessed November 28, 2016. <https://books.google.com/books?id=vtIeXUkEbu8C&pg=PA22&lpg=PA22&dq=small+archives+large+institutions&source=bl&ots=ruQJx8dlvK&sig=mn7-nm6l8j7mXHYtgC1yghAG634&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiosbaJ88vQAhUT4mMKHQnNC-g4ChDoAQgaMAA#v=onepage&q=small%20archives%20large%20institutions&f=false>.

- An area secured with locks and alarms. The local police force should inspect the archives and offer suggestions for improved security measures.
- An accessible, sheltered receiving area. In poor weather, archival materials should be covered in waterproof containers or bags while they are being moved. Archival materials should not be left outside or in exposed areas for long periods of time.
- A separate processing area with sufficient space to arrange and box materials without crowding, close to supplies and stationery but separated from researchers. An area, even a desk or table, should be set aside to be used strictly for processing.
- A separate storage area, large enough for materials on hand and for new accessions. Ideally, one needs enough room to grow at a rate of 10 per cent a year for five years. The floor should be strong enough to hold the weight of all the records. The research and storage should be divided into areas with walls, bookcases, or shelving.
- A separate research area, such as a desk or table, with good lighting and sufficient workspace, close to the archivist but separate from the storage and processing areas.
- An area for administrative work, with a desk, telephone, typewriter, and other necessary facilities.

- Other space, if needed, such as meeting rooms, a conservation area, exhibit space, a vault for valuable materials, a room for playing audiotapes or films, or a lunch room.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, this ideal situation rarely happens. Although storage is important, since “heat, humidity, improper storage, the slow march of time, and the chemical composition of the film itself all work as agents of destruction,”<sup>14</sup> most small archives do not make it a priority, especially since most acquired items were previously stored in even worse conditions. The AGFA collection is currently stored at the Alamo Drafthouse Village location in Austin, Texas, which was:

Originally constructed in 1973 as a four-screen movie theater [and] refurbished by the Alamo Drafthouse (...) when it took over the theater in 2001. The films are stored in the second story of the building, in a series of rooms surrounding the projectors for the four screens. The films are stored on bare wood shelves constructed specifically to house the collection. There is no climate control system in place, beyond the standard air conditioning used for the theater.<sup>15</sup>

A survey determined the temperature in the theater in February of 2012 fluctuated between 69 degrees Fahrenheit and 75 degrees Fahrenheit and was only controlled by a general thermostat.<sup>16</sup> In the same survey, it was also noted that films were kept away from windows and sunlight, but were exposed to large variations in relative humidity, which is extremely detrimental to film preservation.

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<sup>13</sup> “A Manual for Small Archives.” Archives Association of British Columbia, 1999. <http://aabc.ca/media/6069/manualforsmallarchives.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Tucker, Benjamin. “A Modest Movie Migration: Digitizing and Providing Institutional Repository Access to a Small Archive of Motion Picture Films at a Liberal Arts College.” *Public Services Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (October 2013): 342–47.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, Griffin, and John Schooley. “American Genre Film Archive - Preservation Needs Assessment,”

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



Another problem related to storage that AGFA deal with is the fact the prints are currently stored in cardboard boxes and metal reels, in some cases without any external protection (i.e. film can). Due to the limited staff, AGFA still aims to re-house the films in plastic reels and cans, since “[transferring] the reels to plastic cans would greatly reduce the danger to the prints from water damage [and] cardboard boxes are also more likely to harbor pests, expose the films to more dust, and protect them less from falls, than do plastic film cans.”<sup>17</sup> They also have a long term plan to find a facility solely dedicated to the institution.

Due to its limited space and staff, it is common for a small archive to partner up with a larger institution in its endeavors. Good examples of this are the Tennessee Archive of Moving Image and Sound, which is associated with the Knox County Public Library, and the Lynn and Louis Wolfson II Florida Moving Image Archives, which partnered up with Miami-Dade College. These partnerships can give a small archive extra storage space for their prints and videos, a good source of volunteers, and even help when applying for grants.

When it comes to funding and budgeting, small archives encounter other challenges. Non-profits like AGFA depend on grants and donations to keep them afloat. Some grants, like the National Endowment for the Humanities Preservation Assistance Grant<sup>18</sup>, are especially aimed to help small to mid-size institutions in their efforts to preserve various types of materials, including audio-visual items. With this grant, an

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> “Preservation Assistance Grants for Smaller Institutions.” *National Endowment for the Humanities*. Accessed November 26, 2016. <https://www.neh.gov/grants/preservation/preservation-assistance-grants-smaller-institutions>.

organization can request up to \$6,000. Aside from private sources, “money may be available from federal, provincial, and municipal sources, through heritage, historical, archival, or job-skills training programs”<sup>19</sup> but more and more, institutions are coming up with their own creative ways to increase their funding. It is common for small archives to charge a fee for certain services like photocopying and photo-reproduction<sup>20</sup> or even moving image transfers, as the Northeast Historic Film Archive does.<sup>21</sup> In 2015, AGFA launched a Kickstarter and Indiegogo campaigns to help raise funds in order to buy a 4K film scanner “to digitally transfer original film elements from the Something Weird collection, as well as one-of-a-kind obscurities in [their] archive.”<sup>22</sup> They were able to successfully raise \$33,796 on Kickstarter, surpassing their \$30,000 goal, and \$17,732 on Indiegogo. With the 4K film scanner, AGFA intends to improve their preservation efforts since:

Commercial potential is not a goal. No one’s going to make money off of a DCP of *Sinner’s Blood*. But movies like *Sinner’s Blood* are important to [the archive]. If we love them, there’s a chance that other people in the world will also love them. We want people to see these movies (...) some of the rarer, one-of-a-kind prints in the archive are rapidly degrading. The next best thing to preserving that actual print is preserving a [high-resolution] digital version of that print.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “A Manual for Small Archives.”

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> “Services | Northeast Historic Film.” Accessed November 26, 2016. <http://www.oldfilm.org/content/services>.

<sup>22</sup> “AGFA and Something Weird.” *Kickstarter*. Accessed November 26, 2016. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/agfa/agfa-and-something-weird>.

<sup>23</sup> “Celluloid Heroes: An Interview with Joe Ziemba of the American Genre Film Archive.” *Loser City*, June 2, 2014. <http://loser-city.com/features/celluloid-heroes-an-interview-with-joe-ziemba-of-the-american-genre-film-archive>.

The success of their campaign is greatly attributed to AGFA's active presence on social media websites, including Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, where they post updates and screen grabs of their many film prints.

While large archives might spend a considerable amount of time and money dealing with copyright issues, especially if they handle big Hollywood movies, small archives have their own ways to protect themselves. After all:

Film archives own, or hold on deposit, many physical works of film, whereas the copyright owner to these might be someone quite different. Commercial archives tend to be the copyright owners to most of their holdings whereas generally, public archives own little copyright. Film material is fragile material that needs special treatment for long-term preservation and film archives often have to duplicate original elements in order to ensure the long-term survival of their contents. Duplicating works and communicating them to the public are considered to be copyright restricted activities and without the consent of the rights holder considered to be prohibited.<sup>24</sup>

Small archives tend to collect and preserve films whose right holders might be either long gone or unknown. These films, which can be orphans, educational, industrial, and even home movies, can be hard to track down, but mostly the responsibility to get copyright clearance falls on the researcher or the person who wants to screen or release the picture.<sup>25</sup> AGFA deals with each film differently, depending on its origins and copyright holders. In the case of the only surviving print of the 1975 film *The Astrologer*, AGFA got a 4k film transfer made and teamed up with Chris Poggiali, from the website Temple of Schlock, to exhibit it on "the AGFA Endangered Fest, an all-night marathon

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<sup>24</sup> Kamp, Op den, and Claudy Wilhelmina, Elisabeth. "The Go-Between. The Film Archive as a Mediator Between Copyright and Film Historiography," 2015. <https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/handle/10026.1/3378>.

<sup>25</sup> "A Manual for Small Archives."

of films once thought lost but currently housed in the AGFA archives.”<sup>26</sup> To AGFA’s surprise, a major studio stepped out as the film’s rights holder, which led to a series of negotiations.

However, *The Astrologer* is not the norm for AGFA. In the case of the 1988 film *Miami Connection*, the archive was able to find the person who made the movie and reach a deal. *Miami Connection* ended up being released by Drafthouse Films soon after.<sup>27</sup>

Small moving image archives face many challenges, ranging from limited staff to limited space. However, there is no doubt their work is invaluable in preserving pieces of culture and history, which tend to be forgotten or neglected by larger institutions. By collecting and preserving educational, industrial, independent genre, orphan, and other not-so-common and not-on-demand films, these institutions allow the public to access rarities that could have easily been left to rot in someone’s trash or attic.

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<sup>26</sup> Kelly, Brian. “The Astrologer.” *Alamo Drafthouse*. Accessed November 27, 2016. <https://drafthouse.com/show/the-astrologer>.

<sup>27</sup> “The American Genre Film Archive On Why Exploitation Movies Are Worth Preserving.”

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