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Conference

Welcome Back: Association of Moving Image Archivists Annual Conference

NOVEMBER 16–19, 2011, AUSTIN, TEXAS

Melissa Dollman

The Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) annual conference, held November 16–19, 2011, lured hundreds of archivists, librarians, preservationists, students, professors, technicians, and vendors from around the world away from their desks and workstations to Austin, Texas. Even a brief foray around the capitol reaped a big helping of Austin hospitality, and if this was a return visit for an AMIA conference, as it was for me (2005 happens to have been my first conference), well then, it offered seconds.

After reviewing the conference program, my notepad, the AMIA Listserv, social networking sites, and a few friends' memories, I am left with a distinct impression of the theme for the 2011 AMIA conference: access. I know, it is such a common refrain that the word is written into your archive's or library's mission statement, you had to take a class dedicated to it, or it is recognized as an integral component in your grant writing efforts. What we may not all readily recognize, until we step back and review, say, a conference program, is what we are doing about it. The AMIA conference brought together many events that converged under the access theme: cataloging workshops; dedicated panel discussions; activist archiving events; screenings in multiple genres and formats, including video, time-based formats, and new media (and discussions about their complex preservation needs). In addition to these more universally understood definitions of archival access, tweeting and blogging, the AMIA Listserv and forum, increased media attention to archival issues, more videotaping of conference sessions, and welcome improvements to an eagerly anticipated new AMIA website promise improved access to *us*, a community of archival professionals and fellow enthusiasts in a position to help.

As a group, we addressed access issues with a wide lens and from a variety of angles, even when preservation as a topic was front and center. Jumping off from the axiom "preservation without access is pointless," there was a plethora of preservation-oriented discussions, approximately fifteen, this year.¹ The following is only a sample; however, you can see the whole lineup on the AMIA conference website.² The conference is not complete for some members without attending The Reel Thing Technical Symposium (XXVIII), scheduled during daylight hours (not that attendees would know) of the opening day of the conference. This year, it was held at Austin's famous Alamo Drafthouse Cinema. Chaired for many years by Grover Crisp and Michael Friend of Sony Pictures Entertainment, the symposium presented examples of the latest technologies in audiovisual restoration and preservation techniques on the big screen. Topics included new sound restoration tools as presented by Robert Heiber (Chace by Deluxe) and Ken Weisman (Library of Congress) and a consideration of the aesthetics of sound restoration in *The Sun Legend of the End of the Tokugawa Era* (1957) by John Polito (Audio Mechanics). Russ Suniewick (Colorlab) tackled magenta-dye fade correction, as Ulrich Rüdél (Haghefilm) looked at dye tinting for color preservation masters via *Das Rätsel von Bangalore* (1918). Perhaps the most anticipated conversation was about the restoration of Nicholas Ray's last work, *We Can't Go Home Again* (1972–2011)—an experimental, multinarrative, multiformat film Ray finished over a number of years with his film students at the State University of New York, Binghamton—by Giovanna Fossati, Anne Gant (both from EYE Film Institute Netherlands), and Heather Linville (Academy Film Archive).

Over the next few days, several other preservation case studies followed, including "Zapruder to History—The Restoration of the JFK Films" by Iwonka Swenson (National Geographic Television) and Dan Sullivan (Image Trends Inc.), about the restoration of Abraham Zapruder's famous 8mm footage of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and other small-gauge films that were shot at the same event; "Building a Preservation Solution for the BFI's Master Film Collection," during which Ron Martin and Sarah-Jane Lucas (both from the

British Film Institute) offered an analysis of the institute's new government-funded, preservation-friendly storage facility; and "IMAP Presents: Case Studies in Independent Media Preservation," with Jeff Martin (archival moving image consultant), Carolyn Faber (filmmaker, consultant), Sandra E. Yates (SWAMP Video Archive Project), Marie Lascu (New York University—Moving Image Archiving and Preservation), and Kristin Pepe (Outfest Legacy Project), which offered what the title implies—concrete examples of how one organization helps to facilitate the less-than-straightforward preservation needs of films produced outside the mainstream.

Presentations throughout the conference demonstrated a continued and concerted effort to address video and digital asset preservation. Along with Dave Rice (The City University of New York), Lauren Sorensen (Bay Area Video Coalition) presented "Secure Media Network: Building a Digital Repository for a Diverse Coalition of Analog Video Collections," a conversation about preservation of video documentation and dance records of the Dance Heritage Coalition archives. Through the collaborative efforts of the Bay Area Video Coalition and Audiovisual Preservation Solutions, and working with open source tools, they offered the formulation of a soup-to-nuts plan of action for digitization and cataloging. In "Video Archiving from Start-up to First Migration: A Report," Franz Pavuza (Austrian Academy of Science Phonogrammarchiv) tackled similar issues, with a special emphasis on the granular aspects of codecs (which convert analog signals to digital) and formatting of migrated materials. During "What Should We Do Today: Toward an Interim-Master for the Preservation of Digital Audiovisual Materials," Jimi Jones (Library of Congress), George Blood (George Blood Audio), and Courtney Egan (National Archives and Records Administration) argued that an interim digital master was a more reliable and long-term stopgap measure for inevitable future migrations. And on a return visit, Andy Maltz (Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, Science and Technology Council) and Milt Shefter (Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, Digital Motion Picture Archive Framework Project), in their session titled "The Digital Dilemma 2 . . . It Continues," moved the conversation beyond

safeguarding studio-produced motion pictures in nonprofit archives to independent filmmakers' and documentarians' works, including the challenges of sustainability, issues of copyright, and custodianship.

Investigating further the complexities of our field, and the difficult children (i.e., weird genres and formats) we shepherd, Bill Seery (the Standby Program), John Migliore (the Kitchen), and Jeff Martin presented "The Challenges of Conserving Interactive, Multi-channel Time Based Media," an examination of multifaceted digital formats used to create artworks and interactive content. During "Fatally Flawed Film Formats," chair Snowden Becker (University of Texas/Center for Home Movies), Dino Everett (Hugh M. Hefner Moving Image Archive), Tom Aschenbach (Colorlab), and Marsha Orgeron and Devin Orgeron (both from North Carolina State University) projected short-lived and rarely screened film formats such as 4.75mm film produced in 1956 and discussed a 3-D camera and projector for home use. Last but not least, materials such as filmstrips, movie theater advertising "snipes," 16mm educational films, and exploitation films were all dragged out into the daylight by Stefan Elnabli (Northwestern University Library), Walter Forsberg (New York University), Stephen Parr (San Francisco Media Archive/Oddball Film + Video), Austin's own Tim League (American Genre Film Archive), and Skip Elsheimer (A/V Geeks) throughout "Really, What Are You Going to Do with That? Preservation Perspectives on Unconventional Moving (and Not Moving) Images."

A few sessions were specifically dedicated to the topic of workflow and assessment in general: Josef Marc, Aaron Edell, Chris Shroyer, and Stephen Kwartek (all from Front Porch Digital) as well as Gary Adams (Blackmagic Design), James Lindner (Media Matters), and David Rowntree (Archival Media Consulting) walked participants in the workshop "Can My Archive Live Forever?" through analog-to-digital migration. Michael Casey (Indiana University Bloomington) returned to the conference this year to report on the findings of a groundbreaking, campus-wide risk assessment of audiovisual materials at his university and detailed the subsequent actions taken. Attendees of "Developing a Media Preservation Program at Indiana University Bloomington" came away



Enjoying “fatally flawed” films. Photograph by Brian Meacham.

with concrete examples of the centralization of workflow, deliberate prioritization of holdings for digital preservation, and endeavors to communicate access and preservation planning on a large scale. Peter Brothers offered “Tools for Collection Assessment and Determining Preservation Priorities” as an encapsulated version of his magnetic tape triage workshops held previously at AMIA conferences. And for the ever-expanding, smaller-scale collections, Dave Rice, Skip Elsheimer, and Rick Prelinger (Prelinger Archives) regrouped as the “Digitization, Reboot!” panel to propose even *newer* off-the-shelf and on-the-go technologies for digital video processing intended for preservation and, ultimately, access.

As previously suggested, the subject of access proved to be a looping thread throughout the conference, and it came up in a striking variety of conversations and activities. Two events happened before opening-night cocktails. Karan Sheldon and Brian Graney (both of Northeast Historic Film), Jack Brighton (Illinois Public Media), Dave Rice, and Kara Van Malssen (Audiovisual Preservation Solutions) collaboratively brought “A PBCore Cataloging

Workshop,” a welcome nod to the importance of moving image cataloging (full disclosure: I am an audiovisual cataloger) and metadata to augmenting access to collections. Moreover, as part of a very proactive trend toward hands-on community activism within the cities on which we descend each year, the Independent Media Committee’s Amy Sloper (Harvard Film Archive) and Yvonne Ng (WITNESS), along with speakers Jeff Martin, Sandra E. Yates, and Stephen Parr, spearheaded this year’s Activist Archiving Workshop. On Tuesday, there was already a group of almost fifty volunteers made up of AMIA members, students, and people from around the city, processing Austin History Center’s 16mm Film Library’s print collection. Working in two shifts, over 140 cans, containing 185 separate items from the Texas Motion Picture Services film collection, were processed and minimally cataloged.

Further enlightening our own ranks about Southwest- and Mexico-based filmmakers and films, a few made their way into conference

rooms, including those represented in “Texas Moving Image Histories,” hosted by Stephen Parr, Elizabeth Hansen (Texas Archive of the Moving Image), and Jean Anne Lauer (Cine Las Americas); “Archivo Memoria: Preserving Orphan Film in Mexico” by Audrey Young (Cineteca Nacional México); and “Film Reportage of the Southwest in the Silent Film Era,” with Greg Wilsbacher (University of South Carolina), Jennifer Jenkins (University of Arizona), and Caroline Frick-Page (University of Texas). (As an aside, I would be remiss if I failed to mention that the 2011 plenary speaker was living local landmark Louis Black. As cofounder of the *Austin Chronicle* and the South by Southwest Festival, a producer, and a lifelong film buff, he inspired the audience to bring the passion back home.)

The essentialness of an online presence for an archive, specifically streaming video, was affirmed repeatedly at this year’s conference. There seems to be a growing acknowledgment that such a presence is supplemental to the live and visceral experience of film screenings and the intellectual or monetary value of an archive’s holdings. For example, Chris Horak (UCLA Film & Television Archive), Leslie Swift (US Holocaust Memorial Museum), and Deborah Steinmetz (Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive), each of whom work for an institution with a YouTube channel, discussed copyright and intellectual control issues facing online collections in “History Online: Balancing Historical Integrity and Increased Access at Three International Archives.” “Access to Three Family Collections: How’d We Do It?” speakers Kim Stanton (University of North Texas), Ned Thanouser (Thanouser Company Film Preservation Inc.), and Rick Prelinger—a presentation I moderated—all addressed the road to online access from the perspective of working with three very differently sized family collections. The Dutch were on board as well with Emjay Rechsteiner’s (EYE Film Institute Netherlands) presentation “One Size Fits All: Bringing Old and New Films Online,” featuring a video-on-demand platform that, alongside modern fare, also offered historical content.

To push things a little further, Johan Oomen (Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision), Kara Van Malssen, Peter Kauffman (Intelligent Television), Ben Moskowitz (Open

Video Alliance), and Rick Prelinger utilized their session, “Archive and the Commons: Why Archives Should Embrace Openness,” to survey mutually beneficial relationships that participation in the Commons creates between archives and the general public. Coming from a slightly different angle, Geoff Alexander (Academic Film Archive of North America), Lee Shoulders (Getty Images), and Michael Ross (Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc.) joined forces for “Free Public Access by Monetizing Content? A Successful Non-profit/Corporate Model,” discussing a multiyear, mutually beneficial collaboration between the three. Alexander’s archive acquires, preserves, and promotes academic film, while Encyclopaedia Britannica chooses a selection of films from its collection for digitization, Getty Images licenses clips, and the public can view the films for free on the Internet Archive. Finally, May HaDuong (Academy Film Archive) invited Brittan Dunham (Sundance Art House Convergence), Anne Morra (Museum of Modern Art), and Lars Nilsen (Alamo Draft House Cinema) to chat about modifications to lending practices, borrowing film prints, and the impact of digital distribution and the digital cinema package (DCP). During “Out of Print: The Changing Landscape of Print Accessibility at Film Archives,” panelists talked in a lively manner about prizing the look of 35mm film versus their expense; the ease of using DCPs; the lack of access to archival prints by smaller, lesser known art house cinemas; an upcoming projection guide; and a proposed lender- and peer-reviewed database of trusted film projectionists.

Speaking of screenings, there were quite a few this year. Austin’s historic Paramount Theatre (bats and all) was the venue of choice for nearly all the conference’s screenings, save the site specific or those embedded in sessions. I will run through them chronologically:

Wednesday

- “Reels of Steel.” For the second time hosted by Austin’s Alamo Ritz Theater, film archivists, armed with the “most obscure, entertaining short films”³ in their arsenals, battled for the AMIA Emulsion Propulsion Champ 2011 crown (or fat gold chain, as it turns out).

Thursday

- “Texas Moving Image Histories.” See earlier.
- “AMIA’s Archival Screening Night.” Highlights included a memorial to recently departed friend Alan Stark and an acknowledgment of filmmaker George Kuchar’s passing preceding an excerpt from his *Club Vatican* (1984). Other presentations featured a selection from the newly restored *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) by Julie Dash; the home movies of African American Baptist minister Solomon Sir Jones (1924–28); *Psycho III—The Musical* (1985), videomaker Tom Rubnitz’s homage to Hitchcock’s *Psycho* but with “a psychedelic drag queen cast”; *Blackie the Wonder Horse Swims the Golden Gate* (1938) in twenty-three minutes, fifteen seconds; and, hard as it was to watch with our modern eyes and sensibilities, a documentation of physiological and neurological experiments on animals at universities in the Netherlands during the 1920s.

Friday

- “The Attractions Are Coming! The SabuCat Trailer Collection at the Academy Film Archive.” Though it was not officially listed as a screening, Cassie Blake (Academy Film Archive) showed a tantalizing assortment of goodies from one of the world’s largest trailer collections, which kept viewers glued to their seats even into their lunch break.
- “Home Movies of Silent Film Stars.” This session was curated by Rachel Parker (Library of Congress), Arthur Wehrhahn (Museum of Modern Art), Trisha Lendo (UCLA), and Heather Linville. Stars at play!
- “Seeding the Clouds: Film on Fog.” Stephen Parr brought together media artists Barna Kantor (University of Texas at Austin) and Scott Stark at the Town Lake Gazebo behind the conference hotel to watch 16mm films projected onto a misty screen of fog.

Saturday

- *We Can’t Go Home Again* (1972–2011). See earlier.

- *Passages from James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake* (1966). Ann Horton-Line (Film Study Center, Yale University) presented a restored Mary Ellen Bute and Ted Nemeth interpretation of the Joyce novel.
- Dwight Swanson’s *Amateur Night: Home Movies from American Archives*, presented by Snowden Becker. This was a feature-length compilation of home movies from 1915 to 2005, from amateur to famous.
- *Word Is Out* (1977). Kristin Pepe hosted the first feature-length documentary about gay identity by gay filmmakers Peter Adair, Nancy Adair, Andrew Brown, and Rob Epstein.
- “AMIA Restoration Screening: *Nothing Sacred* (1937).” AMIA members and the public alike enjoyed a restoration of William A. Wellman’s classic comedy.

While mulling over my observations about the 2005 and 2011 conferences on the plane home to Cambridge, I was thinking about what a difference six years can make to the life of a budding professional in our field or how certain conversations we were having in 2005 have developed and changed. But really, what has not changed is what draws us all together. Newcomers and well-established members alike discover in the preservation of and access to moving image materials a natural extension of our art and our love of history. We gather, make introductions, slouch comfortably in the hotel lobby’s easy chairs, or stand next to each other with drinks in hand and discuss the merits of film alongside born-digital, video, time-based moving images, and our favorite genres. We debate noncustodial approaches to collections and giving stuff away to monetizing efforts to screening 35mm nitrate versus digital projection. On the way to our hotel rooms, or the airport on Sunday, not to mention for the rest of the year, we pledge our love for these things to which we have dedicated our working lives, and we wait to see each other next year.

Melissa Dollman is an audiovisual archivist and cataloger at the Schlesinger Library, which is part of the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University, where she has processed the video and/or audio collections of Betty Friedan, Julia Child, Andrea Dworkin, June Jordan, and many more. She received her MA in moving image

archive studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, and a BA in American studies and art from the University of California, Berkeley. She is thrilled that those years of watching television as a child, and being an all-around dilettante, have turned into a career.

NOTES

1. Committee for Film Preservation and Pub-

lic Access, "Preservation without Access Is Pointless: Statement by the Committee for Film Preservation and Public Access before the National Film Preservation Board of the Library of Congress, Los Angeles, California, February 12, 1993," <http://www.loc.gov/film/pdfs/fcmtfilmprespubaccess.pdf>.

2. <http://www.amiaconference.com/>.

3. Ibid.