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DOI

[10.5117/9789463727235](https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463727235)

Publication date

2020

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Post-Cinema

License

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Fossati, G., & van den Oever, A. (2020). The 21st-Century Post-Cinematic Ecology of the Film Museum: Theorizing a Film Archival Practice in Transition - A Dialogue. In D. Chateau, & J. Moure (Eds.), *Post-Cinema: Cinema in the Post-art Era* (pp. 129-141). (The Key Debates: Mutations and Appropriations in European Film Studies). Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789463727235>

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7. The Twenty-First-Century Post-cinematic Ecology of the Film Museum

Theorizing a Film Archival Practice in Transition –
A Dialogue

Giovanna Fossati and Annie van den Oever

Abstract

Contributing to the cinema death topic while focusing on national film institutes, Giovanna Fossati and Annie van den Oever observe that, while it can be said that processes of digitalization (which raise the question as to whether the notion of film is still relevant in this new technological context) have deeply affected the world of film and cinema, some of the film institutes remain – an index of the cinema persistence. Digitalization concerns reproduction and creation. The exchange of views between Fossati and Van den Oever provides a useful perspective on the issue of digital archiving. It also deeply enriches the idea of post-cinema, more precisely, the idea of “a new post-cinematic ecology.”

Keywords: Digitalization, creation, ecology

In honor of Thomas Elsaesser (1943-2019)

So far no medium has yet wholly replaced its predecessors. Likewise, new techniques do not make older ones disappear. They may, however, modify the cultural and economic context in which they function (for instance, a skill or craft can migrate from the sphere of labor to that of art) and also help establish new diegetic worlds or new media ontologies, as is the case with early – and classical – cinema practices being rediscovered by so many (digital) artists.

Chateau, D., and J. Moure. *Post-cinema: Cinema in the Post-art Era*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020

DOI 10.5117/9789463727235_CH07

Media archaeology is therefore perhaps nothing but the name for the placeless place and timeless time the film historian needs to occupy when trying to articulate, rather than merely accommodate, these several alternative, counterfactual or parallax histories around which any study of the audio-visual multi-media moving image culture now unfolds.

– Thomas Elsaesser (2004, 112).

Prologue

If film archivists would have believed that “post-cinema” must be read in terms of what is left of film after the “death of cinema,” the end of the national film institutes as we know them would surely be close. Nevertheless, some film museums thrive, though not all do. The Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam, the *Museo Nazionale del Cinema* in Turin, the *Cinémathèque Française* in Paris and the Museum of the Moving Image in New York are among the thriving ones. Only recently, Eye’s Chief Curator, Giovanna Fossati, updated her standard work on the transitions taking place in the world of the film museum in her 2018 book *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition*. When she embarked on this study over a decade ago (the study was first published in 2009), her starting point was a reflection on processes of digitalization (the broader impact of the digital on the field of film heritage), starting with the general question: *can we still speak of film* when the film reel is replaced by the digital file and when the digital has become the dominant form? (Fossati [2009] 2018, 15).

From the start, she envisioned that the processes of digitization and digitalization, which had deeply affected the world of film and the cinema as we knew it, did not entail the end of cinema. The ramifications merely denoted a cinema in transition, a cinema that had been in transition from its very beginnings: when analog filmmaking was replaced by digital filmmaking; analog projection was replaced by digital projection; analog film technologies became obsolete and found their way to the archive’s vaults; classical cinema-going practices were replaced by online, on demand and mobile film viewing. To her as a curator, it implied that a *theory of a practice in transition* was needed, not only to study but to also monitor this process, which seemed particularly important for a national film institute responsible for so much of the national film heritage. “Curator,” as a term, stems from the Latin word “cura” for “caring” or “curing.” To curators, in the process of curing, the metaphors of death and dying are not helpful. With its dystopian overtones, the metaphor is definitely memorable and as such is embraced

by some, others – among them those who find themselves in a process of planning and steering and taking responsibility for an institute *in crisis* (as some felt) or *in transition* (as others argued) – are particularly well positioned to treat the metaphor of a dying cinema with great critical care.

In retrospect, it is easy to see that the post-Brighton New Film History Debate inspired the birth of early cinema studies as we know it. As Ian Christie (2006, 66) observes: “crucially, what began as a movement to study these [pre-1906] films empirically – to look at them as archaeological objects – soon became an exploration of their context – of production, circulation and reception – and thus necessarily a study of what no longer existed – namely the vast bulk of these film texts and their places and modes of screening.”¹ “Brighton” also taught film scholars and film archivists about how to work together for their mutual benefit. From then on, as argued by Fossati in her book, many of the leading scholars and film archivists embarked on a very *fertile collaboration and interplay*, affecting the fields of research, education and archiving. If anything, this was not the end of cinema. It was not even the beginning of the end, to quote Churchill. Quite the contrary, one might well argue that these last decades saw a range of new initiatives, which strengthened the fields of film studies and film archiving, among them the first film-heritage study programs (Fossati [2009] 2018, 16, 18).

For many years now, Fossati, a leading film scholar and film archivist herself, has played a pivotal role in reflecting on the transitions in the field of film and their implications for film archival practices. Her impact stems not only from her work as a prolific researcher and curator but also from her work in education. As the co-founder of the film-heritage study program “Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image” at the University of Amsterdam and of the book series *Framing Film*, published by AUP and dedicated to theoretical and analytical studies in restoration, collection, archival, and exhibition practices, Fossati’s work within the field of education is indeed remarkable. This dialogue is meant to reflect on the “post-cinematic” transitions in all these fields and on the new “post-cinematic ecology” she finds herself in within the film museum.

– Annie van den Oever

Annie van den Oever: In the introduction to *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st -Century Film* (2016), Shane Denson and Julia Leyda argue that the term “post-cinema” is problematic in the same way “postcapitalism” and

1 Also quoted in Strauven (2013), who provides a broader reflection on the impact of FIAF Brighton 1978 on the field.

“postmodernism” are. It is just not clear whether “post-” represents a new figure of capitalism, modernism, or the cinema. Does “post-” indicate a clear break with the past? Interestingly, as Dominique Chateau and José Moure state in their introduction to this book, Denson and Leyda argue that if the postmodernism debate taught them anything, it is rather to treat the prefix “post-” as “indicative of a more subtle shift or transformation in the realm of culturally dominant aesthetic and experiential forms” (2016, 6). Would you agree with them that the “transitions” – the word you are using in your book – in the cinema were the result of an evolution rather than a clear break. Moreover, did they affect the culturally dominant forms?

Giovanna Fossati: I certainly agree that the term “post-cinema” (and “post-anything” for that matter) is problematic, and, actually, I think my own term of choice, “transition,” is also problematic for similar reasons. They both imply a linear reading of (film) history and are, therefore, still connected with a teleological approach, even when the intention is to break free of it as I tried to do in my work.

To be honest, I have been doubting that term of choice ever since the first version of *From Grain to Pixel* came out in 2009. A few years after publication, the Stockholm-based film scholar Trond Lundemo (2012) put a finger on the very reason I had struggled with in choosing the term, saying that though I had argued that indeed “transition” is “not only a phase that will end in a final result, but must be understood as an ever ongoing process reforming archival practice and theory” (178). Nevertheless, I did use the term “transition,” which, as Lundemo remarks, “still suggests that we are moving from one situation to another, especially with the ‘from – to’ development in her book’s title” (2012, 178).

Indeed, in my book I tried to defy the inherent linearity of the term “transition” by highlighting that I was interested in looking at “the negligible in-between A and D,” With “A” referring to all analog film and “D” to all digital. In our current state of affairs, we are rather situated in-between. In retrospect, we realize that A never was such a well-defined place to begin with. A was already an in-between, a transition in itself. In light of this, “transition” coincides with a constant in-betweenness ([2009] 2018, 181).

Still, terms like “post-” and “transition,” however nuanced, do privilege a chronological reading that assumes a before and after.

More recently the Udine-based film researcher Diego Cavallotti built further on Lundemo’s point and remarked that he agreed that the notion of “transition” can be misleading. Cavallotti (2018, 153-154) preferred

“conflation,” which addresses both the “differences and intersections between analog and digital,” as Lundemo has also pointed out (2018, 153-154).

That said, I am not suggesting to replace “transition” with “conflation” or any other term. Similarly, I would not want to replace “post-cinema” with a different term. One of the reasons I think these imperfect notions are still valid and productive is that they *do* indeed facilitate the way we talk about history and the history of practices, in our case film (archival) history and the history of film archival practice. So while they need to be approached critically, we also need to maintain a relation to how histories are (culturally) perceived. Concepts of teleology, determinism, evolution have been the object of historiographical critique at least since the 1970s; yet, they are still part of how most people read history. For this and other reasons, our role as scholars (both in research as in teaching) is, in my view, mainly that of promoting a critical understanding of any concept that is used to describe a phenomenon, including those concepts that have been chosen by ourselves. Taking the case of “transition” into consideration, though criticized by myself and others, it is a means to describe the changes in film archival practice and could, more generally, be considered an inherent characteristic of film (archival) practice.

So back to your question, do I agree that the “transitions” in the cinema were the result of an evolution rather than a clear break? Yes, I do agree that what changed in the last two decades has not been the result of a clear break (“a paradigm shift” or a “revolution,” as the digital turn is often referred to). However, as mentioned earlier, I would still prefer to talk about “transition” rather than “evolution.” Besides its linear connotation as Lundemo and Cavallotti have pointed out, “transition” is a spatial term (derived from Latin *transitio*, “going across”), and therefore also conveys a sense of “back-and-forth” movement (something that “post” does not, being a term that pertains to the temporal sphere). It is that continuous back-and-forth (or dialogue or conflation) between past and present; obsolete and new technologies; old and new practices; and theoretical frameworks developed at different points in time and in different contexts, that has been so central to media research disciplines, including those that focus on the archival objects and practices themselves. I think we can speak of this as a new academic practice in our field; a practice that gathered strength at the turn of the millennium, with Media Archeology at its forefront. Finally, and most importantly, “transition” also refers to a back-and-forth between what has been seen as relevant and/or what has been neglected as irrelevant in the past and what is being (re)evaluated today or may be in the near future.

AvdO: In *From Grain to Pixel*, you discuss the so-called “material turn” in reaction to the “digital turn” (Fossati [2009] 2018, 19). You contest the thought that the digital is somehow “immaterial.” Could you elaborate on this? What have been the merits of the “material turn” for the archival world so far?

GF: Generally speaking, the “post-cinema” era has led to a broader concern with film archives and the (material) objects they preserve. Since the so-called digital rollout – the large-scale digitization of the Western film and distribution infrastructure that took place around 2012 – a growing number of filmmakers have shown a renewed interest in traditional film production and projection. British filmmaker Tacita Dean was one of the first to publicly declare to “Save Celluloid, for Art’s Sake” (2011); since then, many experimental filmmakers as well as Hollywood directors such as Christopher Nolan, Quentin Tarantino, Paul Thomas Anderson, Steven Spielberg, and Martin Scorsese have voiced similar pleas for preserving traditional film production as an option for contemporary filmmaking.

As I consider the “digital turn” complementary to the “material turn,” I am not surprised that at a time when digital tools are enabling new research directions into the archives, some researchers are actually drawn to a more “analog” approach to the archives, and the objects and the practices contained within.

AvdO: The editors of *Theorizing 21st-Century Film* did not devote a special chapter to the post-cinematic world of film archiving and the changing practices in this field. However, it seems to me that the major changes in the field of film since the 1980s, which one tends to label as post-cinematic, indeed have had profound implications for the field of film archiving – a field that by its very nature reflects on and responds to the so-called transitions in the field of film. Would you, like Leyda and Denson (2016) and many others with them, primarily situate the current transitions (or transformations) in the field of film “in the realm of culturally dominant aesthetic and experiential forms” (6)? Your book seems to indicate so. I am thinking of the shifts away from “art cinema” as a dominant aesthetic and experiential form to the new post-cinematic (“multiplex” and “home video”) cultures of the 1980s and the sudden shifts in the use of digital viewing technologies impacting the transformations of both user and viewing practices. What would be your main points of attention for such a chapter?

GF: In a chapter on the relation between film archiving and a post-cinematic phase that starts in the 1980s, I would first of all underline that right around

that time when the term post-cinema was first employed, film archiving began to receive recognition as a profession and as an academic discipline. It was in the 1980s that film festivals devoted to restored films started growing into what have since become internationally renowned events; think of the Pordenone Silent Film Festival, founded in 1982, or Il Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna, founded in 1986.

Simultaneously, national film archives also started receiving funding for preservation and restoration on a more structural basis as exemplified in the case of the Nederlands Filmmuseum in Amsterdam (today's Eye Filmmuseum) (see Delpout 2018). Also, the first MA programs focusing on film archiving started in the late 1980s; the first academic master program in film archiving was launched in 1984 at the University of East Anglia in collaboration with the East Anglian Film Archive in Norwich, England, and many such programs followed in the 1990s and early 2000s.²

Question is: was it because cinema was threatened to become marked with “post-,” dead, and obsolete labels that one turned to the practice of archiving the past, which had suddenly become more relevant and urgent? Or was it because new accessible media (videos from the 80s and digital from the late 90s) provided films with a second chance as objects of study that Western film archives started receiving more regular funding and support, and archival studies emerged as an academic discipline? Or was it because these new access media promised new sources of revenue for producers, broadcasters, and, more recently, streaming platforms, that the interest in film archives has gradually but steadily grown in the post-cinematic era? These are all questions that would be worth addressing in such a chapter on the relation between film archives and post-cinema.

Additionally, in terms of research and reflection, there is still a lot to investigate. In the last two decades a growing number of academic and professional resources have emerged that help map the changes in film archival practices in the last decades.³ However, there is still much room for reflection, and the coming decades will undoubtedly offer a great deal of new topics worth researching and reflecting on. Indeed, film archival studies remains a young discipline, and, as I have argued, film (archival) practice is still (has always been and will continue to be) in transition, back-and-forth

2 See Fossati, 2018, 18 and more in general on the institutionalization of AV archiving programs, see Olesen and Keidl, eds. 2018.

3 Pescetelli 2010; Bursi and Venturini, eds. 2011; Frick 2011; Enticknap 2013; Parth, Hanley and Ballhausen, eds. 2013; and Lameris 2017, to name a few monographies and edited volumes focusing on film archival practice that have appeared since the first edition of *From Grain to Pixel* in 2009.

between its analog past, its hybrid present, and its supposedly digital future (Fossati [2009] 2018, 14-15).

In particular, there are a number of emerging areas where archivists and scholars are teaming up to produce promising results. I am thinking of projects in the so-called digital humanities where the study of digitized archives, making use of innovative digital tools, has led to very interesting results, as in the case of such projects as: Cinemetrics, Cinema Context, Digital Formalism, The Timeline of Historical Filmcolors, and The Sensory Moving Image Archive.⁴

However, I am also thinking of projects that are not enabled by digital tools, but rather focus on objects and practices (including analog, hybrid and digital ones), like with Experimental Media Archeology.⁵ Concerning such an approach, the Network of Experimental Media Archeology embedded in your Film Archive at the University of Groningen, and the project “Doing Experimental Media Archaeology” (DEMA) led by Andreas Fickers at the University of Luxembourg, immediately come to mind.⁶

AvdO: When you speak about the technologies used in the digital era you remind your readers that many are hybrid (Fossati [2009] 2018, 41), that the practice of use is hybrid as it relies on a long tradition and expertise in analog filmmaking (55), and that the lens-based media did not see much of a change because they continued to use the same lenses (74). Are you perhaps warning against an overestimation of the direct impact of digital technologies on the transitions in the field of film? Are the changes in the institutes and in the user practices perhaps more gradually, less visible, yet more profound?

GF: Indeed, I argue that today’s practice is still hybrid and that the “digital” is not as immaterial as we tend to think it is. When working in a film archive and being involved in acquiring, preserving, restoring, and projecting born-digital films, one tends to appreciate how “material” digital technology still is. Fundamentally, the hardware to handle born-digital films is still as material as that of film-born films. Digital cameras, projectors, and tapes are all material objects that often use the same technology as when film

4 More information on these projects can be found at: <http://www.cinemetrics.lv/index.php>; <http://www.cinemacontext.nl>; <https://www.ims.tuwien.ac.at/projects/digital-formalism>; <https://filmcolors.org>; <https://sensorymovingimagearchive.humanities.uva.nl>. For a thorough discussion of these kinds of projects, see Heftberger 2014; Olesen 2017.

5 Fickers and Van den Oever 2014; Fossati and Van den Oever, eds. 2016.

6 See <https://www.czdh.uni.lu/projects/doing-experimental-media-archaeology-dema-practice-theory>.

was fully analog (e.g., lenses). Even when talking about digital data files, one can argue that signs of materiality can be encountered. One example I find fascinating is that of the “dead and defective pixels” (Fossati [2009] 2018, 74-75), caused by sensors in a digital camera that are not responding to light. There are several other kinds of “digital artifacts” (see 119, 204, 217, 381) that show signs of a physical intervention during a hybrid workflow that transforms images through light into data.

Finally, it should also be stressed that most film practices, both in production and archiving, rely on more than a century of analog tradition and are, therefore, imbued with hybrid and digital practices that continue to develop and evolve.

AvdO: You have been closely studying the transitions in the world of film archiving for about 15 years now. Would you speak of a new post-cinematic ecology in the film archival habitat? When I talk about this new ecology of the film archive, I am referring to the new patterns, balances, and relationships between those involved in the museum’s work, in today’s environment of the film museum as an institution. Is there perhaps a new ecology that signals that some serious transitions have taken place in these last decades?

GF: In terms of a new post-cinematic ecology in the film archival habitat, I think it is time to move on from the “digital turn” discussion and shift our attention to other aspects of film archiving that are currently more urgent.

In the years to come, for instance, I intend to particularly focus on researching about film archiving on a global level. In the past, I mainly studied Western institutional archives through the lens of the analog to digital transition. Moving on from that, I want to delve into archives in the so-called Global South and expand my research to alternative or counter archives world-wide.⁷ Film scholar and archivist Caroline Frick’s critique on mainstream film archival politics and the related assumptions of what “film heritage” is, will be my starting point.⁸

7 For a general idea of what these kinds of alternative archives might be, consult the program of the 4th Eye International Conference, *Activating the Archive: Audio-Visual Collections and Civic Engagement, Political Dissent and Societal Change*, <https://www.eyefilm.nl/themas/eye-international-conference-2018>.

8 In particular, when Frick writes, “film and television archivists employ the concept of heritage to support their current actions and projected budgets. Both corporate and nonprofit film archives have assumed the role of protectors of global motion picture heritage. They proceed in this weighty (and nobly viewed) task by utilizing very specific rigid methods and standards without questioning the powerful connotations of what is meant by ‘heritage’” (2011, 18).

After focusing my research on Western archives, it is crucial to learn how the archives' traditions in the Global South, as well as that of alternative archives, cope with digitalization today. In a time when the kind of high standards proposed by Western institutional archives appear to be unsustainable in the long run, it is important to look for alternatives, North and South, West and East together, and search for a global approach. I am also very curious to see if the theoretical frameworks I have identified in my research are still valid on a global level, and what other frameworks may arise when looking into archives with different histories, alternative policies, and practices.

Epilogue

In retrospect, it is easy to see that the “death of cinema” discourse of the 1980s coincided, ironically, with the birth of a new critical discourse, if not a new discipline: New Film History. The term is closely connected to seminal thoughts on the topic by the late Thomas Elsaesser. At the end of his 2004 article “New Film History as Media Archaeology,” he argued that the new digital technologies of the 1990s had had a complex impact on our understanding of film history and the role technologies had played in it. However, in order to benefit from this new/old relation, we would need to overcome the opposition between “old” and “new” media, which, he argued, destabilizes our understanding of media practices, today’s media practices included. Accordingly, he pleaded for a “Media Archaeology” that helps to overcome the opposition between “old” and “new.” And he appealed to film historians to dedicate themselves to rewriting film history as a social history of film cultures, instead of merely an art history of the moving image.

Thomas Elsaesser returned to the topic over and over again. He had a famously critical relation to film history as well as a keen interest in all the elements the past has left to us, including the collections in film heritage institutes. As a simple manifestation: he helped establish the University of Amsterdam’s Master program, “Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image,” which Giovanna Fossati has been continually involved with since its establishment in 2003.

In honor of Thomas Elsaesser, we wish to end this dialogue referring to the archival and educational practice that he envisioned at the end of his 2004 article as a historical practice in which,

[n]ext to an *aesthetics* of astonishment for which Tom Gunning once pleaded, there [is] room for a *hermeneutics* of astonishment, where besides

curiosity and scepticism, wonder and sheer disbelief also serve as the impulses behind historical research, concerning the past as well as the present. (2004, 113)

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Annie van den Oever is Head of the Film Archive and Media Archaeology Lab; Associate Professor of Film at the University of Groningen; Extraordinary Professor for Film and Visual Media at the University of the Free State, South Africa; and Research Fellow at the Université de Luxembourg. She is series editor of *The Key Debates* and until recently she was an editor

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