
Whose Memory? Reflections on the Construction of an Archive, or Canute Against the Waves of Oblivion

Claire Barwell

Abstract

This is a personal account of the struggle to create an archive of student films and raises questions about what constitutes the memory of a film school. Is it the student work or the students' memories of what they have learned?

The proposition 'audio visual archives and memory of film schools' intrigued me. As I fight to retain any record, any trace of the work of our students (and therefore of my colleagues and myself) I am challenged by various questions: What is it for? Who is it for? What is the purpose of an archive? Who needs these records of the past? What will they be used for?

The course which I currently run has a long history, emerging out of an English Art School tradition and developing as an audio-visual studies programme combining photography, animation and film at the Guildford School of Art from the 1950s. The records of its past cover an interesting period in the development of art school and media education and of the idea of a film school within the art school, within what is now a University, as it has moved premises and changed name numerous times.

As I seek answers to my questions I think about the battles that we have had to face to retain any sense of history, of continuity or of value. Within the institution we are but one unit and subject to changing policies. Changing policies with regards to rights over student work and in the use of space, and changes of personnel, roles and responsibilities. As a film course, there is little autonomy to determine our past, to build our future. Though as I write about memory and archives, I have also been asked by the Dean of the Faculty to write about the future, to propose a future for the course. What therefore will its foundations, its memory, its values, its history, its roots, be? And how can we establish, record and celebrate this?

To talk about an archive I start from poor beginnings. Many attempts to conserve, preserve, retain some record of even the student films have been thwarted. The film laboratories which retained the master material have closed. Where should they send the numerous cans of film? As each one closed, more cans of negative were delivered. The institution has grown in size (numbers) but not in physical space. Cupboards were found, then requisitioned. Film cans were stored in hidden corners, on staircases, mixed with donated stock for drawing on film and found footage projects. Negative, cut negative, married prints, rushes were mixed together in the convenience of making piles of material – cans stacked for size rather than for ease of being retrieved. A flood in the studio where most of the material was held proved disastrous – an expert assessment was made and much of the material was subsequently destroyed

and disposed of, deemed beyond repair. [Fig. 1] An off site storage facility was found for a collection which formed the basis of the Animation Research Centre – our films were bundled off one summer with them, with no record of what was taken. This storage – ‘Keep Safe’ (but out of reach) - was then deemed too costly. Material was brought back to the college but with nowhere suitable to store it; much of this material was unlabelled, unrecorded and in very poor condition. A small cupboard was found. I could rest in peace (except for when I walked down the corridor and saw film cans cheerfully reflecting the sunshine).[Fig. 2] Then the cupboard was requisitioned for more important material. All that I had retrieved was put in the corridor, then a container in the car park (some had irrevocably been thrown into a skip). [Fig. 3]. And the cupboard now contains broken chairs and empty boxes.

To begin again....

I applied for funding to an ‘innovation fund’ within the University to construct an archive – great enthusiasm, but little advice, support or indeed money was forthcoming. I attempted to start with films that I knew, that I had supervised, that I therefore had some memory of. Films at that time which were delivered and completed on Beta SP. Hopefully, I fondly imagined, a format more conducive to the vagaries of storage – at least smaller and more uniform in format. The money granted from this innovation fund



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

stretched to the purchase of two metal filing cabinets, soon completely overflowing with no one to record and catalogue the material. Occasionally I could squeeze some money from another budget to pay students to make the labels and create some order.

Moving on from this, my colleagues in charge of the post-production facility gained funding from another University fund for capital expenditure for a digital storage facility. But this too has proved impermanent, now full to capacity and close to collapse, with more funding required to maintain or to replace it. As formats change and develop there is evidently an urgent need to find a solution to this and those actively engaged in the archiving of film work who have the means to do this are clearly in a better position to talk about this than I am. What is needed is a format resistant to the vagaries of change in technologies, temperature, staffing and therefore memory; and a system of cataloguing which enables the retrieval of names, titles and materials.

What I have written above is a confessional catalogue of disasters, which is in itself embarrassing, but I am sure that I cannot be alone.

However, I can at last report that this summer, following the donation of cans of films from a retired colleague who taught on the course for over 40 years, the appointment of an archivist in the University library, and the temporary appointment of an amanuensis we have now counted, catalogued and stored the remaining boxes of tapes and columns of film cans (over 700). There is a new system for cataloguing the material. I can breathe a sigh of relief. We know what we have (and do not have) and we know where it is. The condition of much of the material may be poor and the costs of restoration are beyond our current means.

There are some films which have badly deteriorated over time, and are suffering the effects of extreme rust, mould, and/or nitrate/acetate base degradation. The better news is that approximately 75% of the actual films are in an okay or good condition. Some of the cans which have external rust are perfectly fine on the inside, and even the cans which are exhibiting signs of internal rust contain film which is more than likely fine¹.

What is there is of course a somewhat random assortment of material, as Carolyn Steedman has written:

The Archive is made from selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past and also from the mad fragmentations that no one intended to preserve and that just ended up there².

We have cans of films, tapes of different formats, scraps of paper, notes and the odd photograph. *[Fig.4]*



Fig. 4

But at least what we have forms the basis of something pertaining to an archive. Now I can give a definitive answer to any graduate from the course from the 1970s who requests material. Either it is there, or it isn't. Sadly, the graduation film by Gareth Edwards, who is becoming famous for directing the new *Godzilla* and the next *Star Wars*, is not there, and the beautiful graduation film by Hong Khaou *For Two Hundred Apples* which prefigures his debut feature *Lilting* is only to be found on VHS.

Only last week I was heartened to see a colleague clutching some Beta tapes which she had retrieved from this newly housed archive to show our new intake of students and inspire them with past examples of what our students have achieved, how they have responded to the challenge of the brief. Her memory of the work has enlivened this collection and rendered it of use.

We may not be able to make a DVD of student work by notable alumni like the Polish national film school at Lodź, but we can at least retrieve some of our past work. Constructing and maintaining an archive requires constant attention, Marc Augé compares it to gardening: “remembering or forgetting is doing gardener’s work, selecting, pruning [and weeding]³” Now we need to determine our policies for retaining and maintaining the archive. How big should it be? What should we choose to keep, now that we have struggled to rescue what was almost lost? This, I am sure, is the question that many film schools have already found the answers to. One that I visited as an External Examiner, had a clear policy – we keep it for two years, and then return it to the students. No questions of long-term memory there.

The issue of copyright and who owns the work itself also changes over time and group productions pose further questions of ownership. Digitising the work further complicates the issue. We have the right to copy work in order to preserve or replace it and ‘format shift’ without infringing copyright, but then the work cannot be accessible to the public and can be used for reference only⁴. In other words, a potential minefield.

There is more to the idea of ‘memory of film schools’ than the films that the students have made. As Rod Stoneman avers in the recent book *Educating Filmmakers*: “Recording and understanding the past is a vital foundation for opening a new version of the future⁵.”

This, then, is the challenge that we face and that we need to pose to our students. It is they who will create the future. The fundamental rationale for a film school is the guided exposure that students are given to the past. To create new work, students need to know and understand something of what has come before. As Marina Warner writes about teaching Creative Writing, the Renaissance idea of ‘imitatio’ is still a useful method for teaching. “Digging into the archaeology of a story, into the structure of a passage, these students are like musicians being taught to listen to different ways of playing a piece⁶”. Without roots, their work can be slight, weak, vulnerable, can one say superficial? Without an understanding of the language of film, it can be halting, and stilted. If students can only work with the now, then their work becomes self-referential and shallow. The primary function of a film school must be to challenge the ‘now’ of contemporary media and expose our students to the journey of filmmaking over the past 120 years. It must be to encourage them to challenge the dominant modes of representation with a critical, informed intelligence, to encourage diversity and to work with moving image in ways that we cannot yet imagine.

The memory of a film school resides not only in the archive, but also in the people. Not only in the work produced, but also in the provocations and exercises that are set. One graduate once told me they used my lecture on versions of *Oedipus* to construct a documentary some years after the talk.

At a recent gathering of alumni I asked former students to tell me something that they remembered from studying with us. One wrote ‘to this day, every time I sit at my computer to write, I am transported to Brian Clark’s screenwriting class and all the inspiration, encouragement and praise’. We can never know what effects the nuggets that we throw down before them will have or how the pebbles will create ripples in their imaginations. And it is this that is the true memory of any film school.

Biography

Claire Barwell is Course Leader of the BA (Hons) Film Production course at the University for the Creative Arts in Farnham, Surrey, UK (aka The Farnham Film School). She is also Chair of the National Association of Higher Education in the Moving Image.

She has an MA in Cultural Memory from the University of London and has published in the *The Journal of Visual Communication*, *Undercut*, *PIX*, *Framework* and *Sight and Sound*.

One of her films '*Photographic Exhibits*' is in the Cinenova archive and the National Film Archive.

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- > Visser Andrew, <http://ucaarchives.wordpress.com/2014/08/11/analysing-and-assessing-film-archives/> University for the Creative Arts, 2014, accessed 28 August 2014.
- > Warner Marina, "Diary" *London Review of Books*, Volume 36 number 17, 11 September 2014, p. 42-43.

Notes

¹ Andrew Visser, 2014 Archive Blog <http://ucaarchives.wordpress.com/2014/08/11/analysing-and-assessing-film-archives/> (accessed 28 August 2014).

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² Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*, Manchester University Press, 2001, p. 68.

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³ Marc Auge, *Oblivion, (Les Formes de l'oubli)* translated from the French by Marjolijn de Jager, University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. 17.

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⁴ Legal advice gained from JISC by Lisa Moore, Digital imaging officer at UCA (University for the Creative Arts) Library.

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⁵ Rod Stoneman And Duncan Petrie, *Educating Filmmakers: Past, present and future* Bristol, Intellect, 2014, p. 186.

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⁶ Marina Warner, "Diary", *London Review of Books*, Volume 36 number 17, 11 September 2014, p. 42.

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