
Intangible Memories: Creating the New York University (NYU) Tisch Asia School of the Arts Archive. Possible Models for Future Research and Collaboration between Film Schools

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Abstract

Tisch Asia, based in Singapore is a graduate film program with the same curriculum as NYU Film School in New York City. Founded in 2007 it includes programs in Film, Animation, Dramatic Writing and International Media Producing and its students' films have achieved success at major film festivals including Sundance, the Academy Awards, Toronto, Cannes and others. Although the program had archived some student works from its inception, closure of the school after seven years' existence provided the impetus to archive student films in a more comprehensive way in order to preserve the intangible memory of the film school. Selected student films are being archived from the Tisch Asia Graduate Film Program, reflecting the best practices of preservation, promotion and education, and in order to record the unique nature of the program where students from all over the world shot their films throughout Asia and beyond. In formulating the best system for this Archive, questions arose as to how other film schools handle issues of copyright, financing, preservation and curation of student works and their ultimate use and purpose, as well as ways in which collaboration could lead to better Archive management and deployment for all interested film schools.

More research into current practices by film schools could inspire more schools to start Archives and to benefit from shared experience. Better education in film schools about how works should be archived will help filmmakers preserve their own work; currently there is little attention paid to this subject with subsequent loss of some potentially important works.

As rich sources of content for many reasons, including as documentation of a particular time and place, promotion of student and film school and creation of content which may be repurposed at some later time, archives of students' films present challenges and inspiration to future students, scholars and media professionals.



Oh Lucy! - Kaori Momoi



Oh Lucy! - Kaori Momoi

Introduction

Archiving may be thought of as a modern obsession, playing an important part in the key narratives that shape our world. As Derrida pointed out, “nothing is less clear today than the word “archive¹” This is partially due to the ways in which the term ‘archive’ has shifted and expanded in contemporary cross-disciplinary discourse on the subject. With the current explosion of content, and waves of technological change, more interested parties seek almost unlimited access and a ‘constant pressure to digitalize all things²’. ‘The old archive space has changed radically primarily because of social media, and this means that the archiving of student films, such as it has been done, is also evolving³. Since we are now a society of self-archivists the profession of archiving has to redefine itself and show its relevance, primarily by making archives accessible and relevant to everyone where they can engage freely online while legal protections of content are also honored.

In creating a student film archive at Tisch Asia, NYU’s Graduate Film Program in Singapore, certain questions arose concerning the archiving of student films, which offer some discourse on how collaborative models could better serve the wide variety of film schools that exist globally. NYU is both the home of a respected graduate degree in Archiving as well as the alma mater of passionate film preservationist, Martin Scorsese. After May 2015, an archive of selected works from graduate student filmmakers from

Tisch Asia, will be held at the New York campus library providing a window into seven years of filmmaking in Asia by a wide variety of students. The Tisch Asia Archive will be unique but indeed, so is each archive kept by any film school all of which vary widely in format, selection, access, usage, distribution and ownership.

Why keep student films, which ones should be kept, who has access and how should they be used? These were some of the questions that arose as the Archive was created. Though the works of student filmmakers may be thought of as mere exercises or assignments, like sketches for a painter, they are indeed suitable subject matter for an archive, their documentation of a time and place and explication of a philosophy of learning, make each unique to the film school where they are made. They also serve to promote the filmmaker's work and the film school itself and are a record of academic achievement, sometimes leading to a degree. They can also serve as teaching aids, as examples of early work of filmmakers who become successful and as a repository where students know their projects are safely stored.

Generally speaking, a film archive is a specially selected space whose purpose is the preservation and conservation of moving images and anything that produces them⁴. Film archiving is as old as filmmaking. Early examples of preserving films can be seen in the meticulous work of the Lumiere Brothers, pioneers in the development of film and also in film archiving.

Film Schools and Student Films

The 'becoming' of filmmakers is why film schools exist⁵, and the projects students create are an essential part of their education, being the ultimate test of a filmmaker's vision. During the 1960s, films such as 'Easy Rider,' and 'A bout de souffle (Breathless)' demonstrated the power and importance of movies. This cultural shift led to the establishment of many film schools in the 1970s, particularly in the USA⁶. There are currently over 1,200 film schools worldwide⁷. Film schools, like film companies range from a studio-like model such as The University of Southern California (USC), with strong financial support systems, distribution/film festival managers, professional level archives and students' work easily accessible through student film festivals, to Werner Herzog's mentor model, schools located within Hollywood film companies to national film schools of emerging nations who often have only minimal budgets and resources. Universities with government support in Europe, VGIK in Moscow and some schools in the United States, such as USC and The University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) have historically maintained extensive student film archives. At USC, student films have been preserved since the 1930s.

Most film schools develop their own system for keeping the work of their students, with varying degrees of rigor. Since there is often no legal or academic obligation for them to archive students' work, they may only keep award-winning films, examples of films to use as teaching aides and as a record of their pedagogy. Many for-profit schools such as the New York Film Academy are growing rapidly and vary widely in how and what work they keep, often letting each student compile their own portfolio or archive of their work. As a result many student films, even the most important work at any film school, the thesis film, often may not be archived or preserved, unlike written theses, which usually must be archived and available in a library as a requirement of gaining a degree.

Creation of a Student Film Archive: NYU Tisch Asia

The NYU Tisch Asia Archive (NYU TAA) is a work in progress and will be located on the New York campus when the Tisch Asia program ends in May 2015⁸. At Tisch Asia, 167 students shot in numerous countries to produce a body of several hundred separate pieces of work. The student films of Tisch Asia shot in locations such as Nepal, Thailand, India, China, Europe and the USA amply demonstrate the credo of the school – “movies mean the world to us.” Additionally the Singapore-based Asia Film Archive, which seeks to preserve works of Asian filmmakers and those shot in Asia, has requested they also keep a copy of the archive. Since copyright is owned by students, it will be up to them to decide if they wish to do this.

The most pressing issue in creating an archive, including a student archive, is to first record and then preserve. Once that is accomplished, access and use can always be debated and dealt with at some future time, but without the preservation of the ephemeral memories of the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) artists and the student films of the Tisch program and other film schools, there is nothing to debate and nothing to know of these histories and intangible memories of seven years of students creating work in a rigorous film program.

At Tisch Asia, the faculty collectively decided to keep the preferred version of the filmmaker honoring the *auteur* nature of the program. The unique nature of student films as archive material is that there are often many ‘cuts’ of the same work which is why we chose the preferred version of the filmmaker. The main assignments which are graded, usually form the body of the Archive and these include 4-minute black and white films shot on 35mm, without sound, documentaries, and longer narrative works. Many faculty members keep DVDs of work they like, as is the case in many film schools, to use as teaching aids. This is a very individual selection process of course and if the faculty member leaves, their unique collection often goes with them unless it is part of a systematic collection.

Few but the largest and wealthiest film schools have archivists. Mostly it is a task undertaken by faculty and production staff and needs the input of the students to make sure the right cut of their work is saved. Among the practical issues of archiving in some of the larger film schools, the sheer terabytes of digital material present issues of space and funding, as well as the problem of the inevitable disintegration of digital files. Thus most film schools showcase their best work on school websites allowing access through passwords and even hold virtual festivals of student films engaging the viewer interactively. Students enter their films in traditional festivals, which provide a broader context for the viewing of their work and its promotion.

Few student filmmakers will become directors of stature and it is not possible to know who will. A formalized system, preserving key works by *all* students allows time to prove talent and success, which can come in many forms. Even in the era of non-stop recording by personal social media devices, students often fail to keep copies of their own work safely. This was noted by Karen Tan of the Asia Film Archive⁹, a non-governmental organization to preserve the rich heritage of Singapore and Asian Cinema. Upon finding many filmmakers who did not have good copies of their own work, she started a program to educate film schools and individual filmmakers in the value of archiving their works. This is especially crucial in Asia where many filmmakers and film schools do not yet have the resources to preserve students work. If the school is not keeping the work, and without the filmmakers’ commitment to do so, it may vanish¹⁰.

Sometimes students themselves will create a collection of their work, acting as archivists for their entire school in a form of almost archive crowd-sourcing by offering an archive of their student work to any official body that will take over its management¹¹. Thus archiving can be separate and independent from

the film school that produced the students' work. The highly individualistic nature of film schools suggests we will see more unique methodologies evolving in how students' work is preserved. There may be film schools in the future, primarily online MOOCs affiliated to commercial concerns, where Google docs or a YouTube channel is used for archiving student's work. Here the filmmakers themselves are creator, archivist and curator. This presents an issue of copyright and for today's film schools, this is probably the most important factor determining how or if they archive. Whoever pays for the production, owns the copyright. Where a film school funds production, the process of archiving is streamlined as ownership is clear. Mostly film schools do not fund production and the copyright is owned by the student who makes all decisions relating to its use. The copyright issue means that open access, which is often demanded of archives, is often not possible and this is a serious obstacle to an institution placing student films online¹².

Where students' films are preserved, they are often kept in the library, on the school server, in cloud storage, in faculty offices and by students themselves on thumb drives, on Vimeo, Dropbox and on DVDs. Since virtually all student films are digital and celluloid film is increasingly rarely taught due to the lack of labs to process film, cloud storage offers the best option for storage of this constantly generated visual material¹³. Cloud storage may be the cheapest storage option but the contents must still be curated and maintained and recent hacking into supposedly secure cloud systems, opens up other security issues. Also ever evolving media formats will continue to present ongoing issues for all archivists, as material may not be able to be played back due to the rapid obsolescence of playback devices¹⁴.

For all these reasons, the way film schools archive their students' films will not change without research and collaboration¹⁵. Indeed, it may not change at all since there are few or perhaps no requirements by accrediting or educational bodies that stipulate preservation of student films, unlike written theses. Since film schools differ so greatly, no common standards can be imposed regarding the archiving of student films, only discussed and shared by interested parties who want to commence or improve their archive. This also weighs against collaboration among film schools in sharing their students' works, though there are many schools such as Taipei National University of the Arts which hosts a week-long arts festival in which their own students and other film students show their films. It seems most likely that film schools will continue to adopt their own policies on the archiving of student films while students themselves are becoming more active in archiving their own work.

Conclusion

Martin Scorsese, who established The World Cinema Foundation for the restoration and preservation of films, speaks of the profound importance of 'visual literacy,' that is teaching people how to read film so that they can then make films¹⁶. Archives of student films can contribute to the teaching of 'visual literacy' by preserving them for research, teaching and other purposes. Student films are not only crucial to the education of a filmmaker, but they provide a window into the past. At the National Institute of Design in Ahmadabad, India, students' films are described as a "treasure chest for scholars and film lovers alike." It was required that student's film be shot in the city, and now the school has a record of over fifty years of the growth of Ahmadabad which it is screening for citizens and film buffs¹⁷. Inadvertently the student film archive has preserved the growth of the city and many such applications will evolve as more content is preserved and retained.

Research, discussion and collaboration between film schools about how they archive their students' work could open up new ways of exchange and increase the use of related resources like the BAFTA/LA Heritage Archive¹⁸, a currently underused mother lode of stories from media professionals which

could be used to instruct, inform and inspire those of the next generation of filmmakers as well as interested scholars and lovers of the visual arts. In their training, film students are attempting, in Scorsese's words, to learn and practice "the persisting vision... of the language of cinema ...the invocation of life, an ongoing dialogue with life"¹⁹ and this invocation is certainly worth preserving for many reasons, not all of which we can foresee at the time of preservation.

Biography

Screenwriter, producer and Associate Professor of Film at NYU Tisch Asia, Singapore, Gabrielle Kelly is the recipient of two Fulbright Awards: one in screenwriting at Taipei National University of the Arts, Taiwan and the second as writer/mentor in the screenwriting /producing Lab for the ASEAN Independent Cinema Project in the Philippines. She started her career with New York-based director Sidney Lumet and screenwriter/producer Jay Presson Allen on films such as *Daniel*, *Prince of the City*, *Deathtrap*, *The Verdict* and others. Her projects include developing an audio-animatronic show *From A to Z and Back Again*, with artist Andy Warhol and scripts for music maverick Malcolm McClaren. In Hollywood she developed projects for Robert Evans, producer of *Godfather*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Love Story*, *Chinatown* at Paramount Studios and has

worked as executive and producer with HBO, Fields Hellman, CBS Films, Eddie Murphy Productions and Warner Bros. Founder of the BAFTA Heritage Archive and writer/producer of music driven indie film *All Ages Night* she has consulted on many studio and indie co-productions as writer and producer, including China's "*Empire of Silver*," starring Jennifer Tilly. Expert in gender differences in the media industry, her book, "*Celluloid Ceiling; Women Film Directors Breaking Through*," was published to acclaim in 2014. She is currently writing and producing and writing a book on global media education. She has taught screenwriting and producing at USC, UCLA, Chapman, and London's PAL LABS and for the Middle East Sundance Lab/Jordan, as well as leading global storytelling seminars in Russia, India, and China.

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Notes

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archives Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Chicago, University of Chicago, 1998, p. 208.
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² Kate Theimar, What is the professional Archivists role in the emerging archival space <http://www.archivesnext.com/?p=3829> (accessed 6 December 2014).
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³ *Ibid.*
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⁴ *Ibid.*
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⁵ Quoted in Michael Pye, *The Movie Brats, How the Film School Generation took over Hollywood*, New York, Palgrave, 2002, p. 34.
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⁶ Pye, *The Movie Brats op. cit.*, p 3, 15, 34.
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⁷ John Gayle, *Film School Directory*, n° 15 2013, <http://www.filmaking.net/filmschools/> (accessed 06 December 2014).
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⁸ NYU TISCH 'Film Programs', Tisch Asia n° 15 2012, <http://tischasia.nyu.edu.sg/page/home.html>, (accessed 14 November 2014).
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⁹ The Asia Film Archive is a non-governmental organisation which preserves the rich film heritage of Singapour and Asia.
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¹⁰ Nick Deocampo (ed.) *Lost Films of Asia*, Pisaeg City, Anvil Publishers, 2006, p. 57.
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¹¹ Demi Tobias, "Student Archive" dans Berkley Film n° 15 2012, <http://berkeley-film.tobiasdeml.com/2014/01/23/the-cal-student-film-archive-student-films-made-at-uc-berkeley/> (consulté le 7 décembre 2014).
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¹² Kate Theimar, "What is the role of a Professional Archivist" *op cit.*
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¹³ Nicholas Oughton, *Slow Fade to Black: The future of Film Schools acquisitions of Celluloid*, London, CILECT, 2013, p. 7-8.
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¹⁴ Robert Besser, <<The next stage, moving from isolated Digital Collections to interoperable Digital Libraries>> *First Monday* 7 (6), 2002.
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¹⁵ *Ibid.*
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¹⁶ Scorsese, M, 'On the importance of visual literacy' available at <http://www.edutopia.org/martin-scorsese-teaching-visual-literacy-video>.
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¹⁷ National Institute of Design, Ahmadabad, India available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/Archive-starring-Ahmedabad-coming-near-you/articleshow/27041651.cms> (accessed 03 November 2014).
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¹⁸ BAFTA "Heritage Archive", BAFTA Los Angeles, n° 15 2010, <http://www.bafta.org/los-angeles/about/organisation-mission/heritage> (accessed 09 November 2014).
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¹⁹ New York Review of Books, "The Persisting Vision; Reading the Language of Cinema," August 15, 2013.
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