

Film archives online – random but cool

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The future of film archives is digital. What may still look to some like an extension of traditional film archiving practices is becoming the norm because digital is the platform on which the interconnected world is being built, and archives must live in the real world – even if it is a virtual one. This digital world is demand-led. The demands of users whose primary means of engaging with any kind of information or content is through digital platforms mean that soon no film archive will be able to exist without catering primarily for its digital consumers. Archives’ primary place will be online: it is where archives will be discovered; it is where films will be viewed, studied, cited and understood, eventually even acquired; it is where information exchange will take place; above all it is where our users will be found. We are not there completely as yet, because the online video world has really only existed for the past five years or so, and the amount of online content made available from film archives remains proportionately very small indeed, and presented in a form which is usually more about catching the eye of audience of the moment rather than building platforms for long-term access and understanding. There is much that needs to be done in the fields of copyright and licensing, we know, and so long as the current constraints remain then any access solution is certain to feature a combination of web and onsite access. But the digital world is now upon us, and fundamentally this means that – for the most part – users no longer come to us, on our terms; now we must reach out to them, on their terms..

This extension of access is not simply about expanding existing models to digital platforms, but about finding and learning from new audiences. Putting archive films into an online, social environment will lead to new kinds of interpretation and new forms of association, not all of which we might appreciate from a traditional archive standpoint. But we have to learn from these new audiences, and take films to where they want them to be, or else the future for film archives is irrelevance. I am going to illustrate this with one particular example of an archive film released at just the right time into the online environment, and analyse how those who saw it understood it.

¹ This talk has adapted from a posting on my blog The Bioscope, ‘Alice – random but cool’, dated 3 March 2010. <http://bioscopic.wordpress.com/2010/03/03/alice-random-but-cool/>.

In November 2008 the British Film Institute uploaded a film from 1903 onto its YouTube channel, Cecil Hepworth's *Alice in Wonderland*, based on the children's novel by Lewis Carroll.² The nine-minute film was one of a number of early films, out of copyright, that the BFI was making available in this way, with the intention of extending access to an audience beyond the few who might come across the film at specialist festivals, at a cinematheque or at the BFI itself. The film gained a few thousand views over the next twelve months or so, an impressive result for a film that was over 100 years old and whose interest had to lie chiefly with enthusiasts of early film or those curious to see how Carroll's novel had been adapted for the screen at so early a date.

In February 2010, the BFI issued the film on YouTube for a second time,³ this time from a restored print with colour tinting, timed to coincide with the release in the UK of Tim Burton's new *Alice in Wonderland* feature film, made for Disney. This time its reception was extraordinary. Within a week it had attracted over 100,000 views, within two weeks it was 271,000, with the film making it into the top thirty films being viewed worldwide on the viral video charts. The film was embedded in countless blogs and commented on, while other websites reviewed it. Some of these were specialist film sites, but many were major popular locations – such as the celebrity gossip blog *Perez Hilton* – which knew nothing of Cecil Hepworth, but which could spot a hot trend and knew what their audiences wanted to see.⁴

I especially like the title of the posting on the film to be found on the *Oh No They Didn't* gossip site – “Random but cool”.⁵ For those of you for whom English is not your first language, or just those who aren't quite up-to-date with modern teenspeak, “random” means strange or going against the expected run of things. Something being “random” just by itself could mean good or bad – but being “cool” as well confirms it as being of interest and of value to the online sharing community. Links to the video were passed on endlessly via Twitter (and continue to be passed on), as a world-wide audience continues to share in the experience of watching this 107-year-old film.

The reaction from all kinds of people reflected in comments the film received on YouTube, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and elsewhere was almost uniformly positive about the film. The line that kept on being repeated was that the film is superior to Burton's bloated effort, but there was more enough

² The original upload seems no longer to be available on YouTube, though there are several pirated versions taken from the BFI version.

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeIXfdogJbA>.

⁴ <http://perezhilton.com/2010-03-05-the-original-alice-in-wonderland-film>.

⁵ <http://ohnotheydidnt.livejournal.com/44627605.html>.

evidence of genuine appreciation for what could be achieved in 1903. Here are some sample comments from YouTube:

- Wow ... just ... wow
- You can totally see the kids staring at the camera as they walk by and when they ran, probably half of them lost their hats. Hilarious! Love it!
- This kind of creeps me out ... in an awesome way
- Why is the speed normal not sped up like in old movies?
- I can do almost the same on my iPhone!
- I bet if my great great grandpa saw this back in the day he'd be like "woooow the effects are amazing!" :)
- Cool! Does anyone know how the film got so ruined? I haven't had any luck searching on google :(
- this is fake!
- Sorry, but how could this be fake? Just wondering.. It's clear that people were brilliant with movie making before it had really even begun..
- The thing was that back then people just kind of assumed film would last forever, because it was only 8 years old and they had no real idea of what time would do to it, and therefore didn't really take many precautions to keep it in a safe environment or to keep it clear of dirt or water and stuff
- This dissolving effect would have been monumental in 1903. Amazing that we are watching a movie over 100 years old, sharing some of the exact same film techniques as ourselves, and it is STILL better than Tim Burton's version
- Looks a little bit like a hoax
- Nah, it's uploaded by BFI it won't be a hoax
- 100 years from now they will be blown away by how fake Avatar looks ;o)
- Way too much cgi for me
- wow ... we have come a long way
- im actually scared of this
- The special effects are better here than they are in some of today's movies! I would love to have been there when they were filming that :)
- lol the Cheshire cat is just a random cat
- Its amazing to see this after over 100 years and see how far we've come! Its sad to think that everyone in this video is dead by now though :(but I love this video so much :D
- Yeah, I was thinking that too, life is so precious and so short

Such comments do not come from people well versed in film history or film preservation, and they do not come from people who would normally have made up the audience when it was shown at traditional venues for archive films, such as Bologna. But I see from these comments that the general audience of 2010 and 2011 is more than capable of appreciating the creative strengths of early cinema. There is delight at its invention alongside amusement at its quaintness. There is genuine appreciation of its proto-special effects with an understanding of how they fit into an ongoing history of film fantasy. There is witty understanding of how technology informs our perception of things. There is an appreciation of the value of an archive's brand. And there are many trenchant or colloquial expressions which one is unlikely to find in many film text books. Also these are young people who had the patience to sit through a nine-minute, black-and-white film from 1903, seemingly completely remote from their experience, and to have viewed it closely, and with appreciation, and then with an eagerness to share that appreciation with others.

How different from the ways such early films were disseminated and received only a few years ago. *Alice in Wonderland* has been held in the BFI National Archive for years, and I remember it well from the time when I was working for the BFI. The common ways in which we were able to present such films to an audience were at very occasional screenings at the National Film Theatre as part of early cinema programmes (attended by a couple of dozen people if you were lucky) or at festivals and exchange screenings with other film archives and institutes. Sometimes we just viewed the films by ourselves in a private viewing theatre and bemoaned the fact that so few people could see them, or might ever want to see them. Only we understood their true value – or so we believed. VHS and DVD came along to help spread the message, but it was always a tough proposition to sell a compilation of early films. And when did we ever listen to our audience? We told them what was good for them – we curated the programmes, wrote the programme notes, produced the official histories. Fundamentally we kept the films to ourselves.

Now look where we are. *Alice in Wonderland* has been seen by over a million people, in a year. Moreover it has been seen by such a wide range of people. It has been taken out of its specialist field into general appreciation. This is what YouTube does, and the film archives need to take note of. It establishes a common platform for these films that has to be so much better than the specialist ones that we have created for them in retrospectives, festivals and niche DVD releases. When these films are shown to the aficionados or those deemed to know best how to appreciate them, we learn little about them that is new. They are constrained by their select surroundings. Make them available among the skateboarding cats, comic skits, rants and ravings, music videos and TV clips that make up YouTube's mad mix (all of them short films, just like early cinema) and they are given new life through new audiences. The reactions will be wild at times, there will be plenty of misinterpretation or ignorance of 'proper' film history, but the positives far outweigh the petty negatives. The positives are that the film is available to all, that it will be placed in contexts that we as curators or custodians might

never think of, that it is exchangeable and shareable as information, that it belongs to today as much as yesterday.

Of course we do not want YouTube to be the only platform for archive films. There is obvious value in presenting films on an archive's own website. It enables us to manage their presentation, and to associate them all the more closely with our archive's identity. It retains the principle of curation, of that wise understanding the archives have cultivated over the years, and which our familiar users trust. Moreover for some films we may only be able to make them available online under password protection to select audiences, to stay within the provisions of copyright or licensing agreements. It is right that our films should be associated with us. It is part of our duty.

But what is wrong is to leave it at that. Such thinking views a website as merely an extension of an archive's physical presence, whereas in fact the online environment demands a different set of rules, because there is a different engagement with our users. In the online world we can no longer really argue for ourselves as defenders or gatekeepers. Instead we are enablers. It is our duty to make content available to the best of our ability, and then interpretation is in the hands of the crowd.

Of course there are a number of archives who follow a strategy of making content available across multiple platforms, both their own sites and common platforms such as YouTube or Vimeo. This is good policy. Just as rules of digital preservation dictate that the wisest course of action is multiple copies, so the rules of digital access dictate multiple platforms. We cannot expect users always to want to come to us, to take the trouble to find us among the many competing moving images offerings on the Internet. We have to place the films where the widest audience will find them. This is not simply about extending access, but promises an extension of understanding. All those comments on *Alice in Wonderland*, and on many other archival films like it, may not tell us much about film history or film preservation, but they reveal a lot about what intrigues an audience now. Why do some of the YouTube viewers find the film unsettling? What can we learn from their appreciation of how reception in 1903 relates to reception in 2011? What would have been the effect if the film had not been uploaded with the authority of the BFI behind it? Did people in 1903 assume that film would live forever, and what would they have meant by that? Is *Alice in Wonderland* a film of its time or ahead of its time? How do we feel looking at early films, knowing that all those that we see passing across the screen are now dead? There is in these comments the thrill of discovery, which I think we all felt on first encountering archive films for ourselves, but there is also what the film scholar Dan North calls a "productive curiosity".⁶ Such comments are a spur to new thought, to casting aside familiar assumptions, to seeing the films with new eyes. They make the film what it is today. That is, the record of an archive film's reception on websites such as YouTube is now an essential part of its

⁶ <http://bioscopic.wordpress.com/2010/03/03/alice-random-but-cool/#comment-9528>.

meaning. By that I mean that there is significance in the comments beyond the evidence they provide of reception. They have become an integral part of what the film now is. Just as we believe that a film is meaningless without the production credits that give it historical specificity, perhaps now the comments it receives in hyperspace ground it in modern reality. A film without comments may be a film that is not worth watching; who knows, maybe even not worth preserving.

There is another advantage to using a common platform such as YouTube, which is that it places film history within other frames of reference. This is the advantage that general platforms, gateways and integrated search services must have over the dedicated film history sites. The latter place films all too comfortably within their own historical understanding. They are fine if all you want to comprehend is film history, but film history is not enough. We want people who have no appreciation of film, or no need of seeing its products within its own frame of reference, but simply want to find out about something, and that information may exist for them on film.

That is why the European Film Gateway⁷ is a noble endeavour, but the real value lies in how it will link to Europeana,⁸ moving from a body of content people will seek out because it is on film to a body of content that hopes to answer broader questions. I hope that Europeana does become a place for the asking of questions on the scale its devisers anticipate, and I hope that some of the answers people discover will be provided by the special medium of film.

It is worth noting that YouTube is now the United States' second most used search engine – after YouTube's parent company, Google.⁹ People look for things because they are on video. They then comment on them, share what they have found, and in doing so bring meaning to what they have found. It is this environment where we want our archive films to be, as much as possible. Yes we will also want them in the well-managed and curated archive sites and gateways that we as gatekeepers know that it is our duty to maintain. But we must also release our films to the crowd out there who don't know the rules and don't care to.

Seeing the comments *Alice in Wonderland* has received in 2011 is rather like being among its audience in 1903 and hearing how they shared the experience of watching its wonders with the person next door to them at the screening. They would have related it to the world they knew, the people they knew, the other films that they had seen. They would have laughed with it and laughed at

⁷ <http://www.europeanfilmgateway.eu/>.

⁸ <http://www.europeana.eu/portal/>.

⁹ <http://www.tgdaily.com/trendwatch-features/39777-youtube-surpasses-yahoo-as-world's-#2-search-engine>.

it. They would have related the film to themselves, and thereby would have given it meaning. We have lost their thoughts about the film, but we now have our own thoughts on record, and they make us see this archive film as something new, and something that belongs to our time too. Which is kind of random – but cool.