

FILM & SOUND NFSA JOURNAL

A CHARTER OF CURATORIAL VALUES

Paolo Cherchi Usai

In October 2004, with the formulation of a new strategic direction, the National Film and Sound Archive began a process of transformation based on the development of a curatorial structure. This new structure seeks to integrate the existing skills in acquiring, preserving, and making accessible the national audiovisual heritage with an added emphasis on interpretation of the collection based on curatorial expertise and the imperative to further cultivate and promote the ethical standards of audiovisual archiving. This paper is an overview of the main cultural principles governing the activity of curators, with special reference to audiovisual collections in the context of the national and international archiving community, and is consistent with international best practice.

It should be stated at the outset that many of the ethical values of curatorship are already embedded in the NFSA. As such, they will only be mentioned in condensed form in the appendix (adapted from existing literature on the subject) at the end of this essay, and may be alluded to in passing throughout the text.

The main focus here is the intellectual nature of curatorship and its principal manifestations in the audiovisual world.

Among the reference points for the views outlined below are:

- the FIAF Code of Ethics;
- the UNESCO Recommendation on the preservation of moving images (1985);

- the General Guidelines of UNESCO's 'Memory of the World' project;
- the codes of ethics and definitions of organisations such as FIAF, IFLA, ICA, ICOM;
- the Code of Ethics of the Australian Society of Archivists and of the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material;
- *Time in Our Hands* (Canberra: Department of Arts, Heritage and Environment, 1985);
- Ray Edmondson, *Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Practice* (Paris: UNESCO, 2005).

CURATORSHIP IS AN ART, NOT A SCIENCE

Modern curatorship is the outcome of centuries of practice in archives and museums, and of the ongoing interaction between history and society: the heritage of the past, the imperatives, values and trends of the present, the challenges and opportunities provided by an educated forecast of the future.

Curatorial values are not the expression of a quantifiable science. They are a system of ideas which find their expression in three areas: the fundamental imperative to preserve cultural artefacts and make them permanently accessible; the expertise necessary to interpret the recent and distant past; and the organisational structure necessary to protect and develop the cultural manifestations of history. It is in these areas that the curator exercises his or her role of interpreter of culture: he or she is an intellectual bridge between the past and the future, endowed with the strategic vision necessary to decipher the traces of what has happened, to explain them for the benefit of his or her community, and to anticipate the ways in which his or her present will be understood and judged by those who will come after us. The curator is a messenger who has the authority and the obligation to ensure that the message itself will foster memory and creativity at the same time.

THE ARCHIVIST AND THE CURATOR

While there is no universally accepted definition of 'curator' and 'archivist', a degree of consensus on the key features of these professions is shared by a number of scholarly and internet sources; among them are the Association des Archivistes Français, www.archivistes.org; U.S. Department of Labor, *Occupational Outlook Handbook (2004-05 Edition)*, www.bls.gov/oco/ocos065.htm; Isabelle Lachance, 'La profession d'archiviste au Québec', www.ebsi.umontreal.ca/cursus/vol5no1/lachan.htm; the Fédération Française des Conservateurs-Restaurateurs, www.ffcr-fr.org/ref; the US Office of Personnel Management, www.pm.gov/fedclass/1015.pdf; the British LearnDirect, www.learn-direct-advice.co.uk; the *Manual of Curatorship* (London: Butterworth, 1986). These sources are used as the basis for the definitions outlined in this section.

Archivists collect, organise, and maintain control over a wide range of information deemed important enough for permanent safekeeping. They maintain records in accordance with accepted standards and practices that ensure the long-term preservation and easy retrieval of the documents. Archivists often specialise in an area of history or technology. Their goal is to ensure that all the works and materials put under the care of the organisation are treated according to coherent conservation, preservation, and access standards. From the viewpoint of an archivist, no work or material accepted as part of the collection (whether it is a preservation or access element) deserves a lesser degree of professional care than others; this does not contradict the archivist's prerogative of recommending acquisition and preservation priorities. Fluency in professional practice related to the conservation, preservation, identification and cataloguing of the works and materials is an essential requirement of an archivist.

Curators formulate and develop the intellectual and cultural policy of archives and museums. They direct the acquisition, preservation, and exhibition of collections, including negotiating and authorising the purchase, sale, exchange, or loan of collections. They are also responsible for authenticating and evaluating the significance of the works in a collection on the basis of agreed parameters and in compliance with the institution's Collection Policy (for a definition of 'significance' of a cultural artefact, see the UNESCO 'Memory of the World', www.amw.org.au). Curators oversee and help conduct the institution's research projects and related access and outreach programs. An increasing part of a curator's duties involves management and administration. Curators must be intellectually and operationally flexible because of their wide variety of duties. Leadership ability and business skills are crucial, while marketing skills are valuable in increasing attendance and potential funding.

SO WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Given the above definitions, isn't there an overlap of desirable skills for curators and archivists? Don't they both collect, preserve and make accessible a collection? The answer is yes: curators must actively contribute to the development of archival standards, and archivists are expected to make recommendations to the curators in matters pertaining to their expertise. The collaborative nature of the relationship between curators and archivists is key to the life of a collecting institution. The archivist is the custodian of the standards governing the management of a collection; the curator is the collection's spokesperson. These roles are necessarily intertwined, as a curator is expected to embrace archival standards, and an archivist should be aware of, and be able to promote, the cultural significance of the collection. Before deciding on a given policy, the curator must consult the archivist in relation to its compliance with the best available archival practice. Curators and archivists have distinct and yet complementary roles; from this standpoint, they have equal professional standing in a collecting organisation.

This balance of power ensures that no curatorial decision is made without proper consideration of the safety and integrity of the collection.

It should also be pointed out that while an archivist can exist and successfully operate in certain contexts without a curator, a curator cannot fulfil his or her obligations to society in the absence of an archivist or at least of a thorough archival perspective. Even the organiser of a temporary show needs to identify, locate and retrieve artefacts existing somewhere, be it in a private collection or in the warehouse of another organisation.

However, the archivist and the curator have also a distinct set of responsibilities which make their dialogue a necessity. To understand this, one must bear in mind that a cultural artefact is not a monolithic entity. It is a complex reality resulting from the interaction between its three key components:

- the work, as defined by the carrier – when it exists – and its content;
- the environmental, social, cultural and industrial context surrounding its creation;
- the way in which it was and is experienced.

In curatorial terms, 'content' deprived of its context or experience is just a matter of consumption, a commodity (hence the preferred use of the terms 'work' or 'artefact' in the archival and museum world); a context and an experience of a work scrutinised or recreated on the basis of a distortion or absence of the content and its original medium is at best an incomplete and at worst a misleading way to interpret and explain society, very much like a biography written with no evidence nor witnesses. The archivist collects, preserves and makes accessible the works – that is, the contents and the identity of their media. The curator interprets the work both in its 'media' (or 'carrier') and 'work' ('content') manifestations. At times, she or he explores and determines the past, present and possible future context of its presentation, and ensures that the experience is organised in a way that is both consistent with the historical identity of the work and with the opportunity to generate new knowledge from it. Hence the reciprocal bind (at times a creative tension) between the professions of archivist and curator.

THE PERMANENT ACCESS TO HISTORY

The first imperative of curatorship is to ensure that the traces of history embodied by the works in a collection will not be altered, manipulated or modified under any circumstance for any reason whatsoever, be it of a political, racial, religious or economic nature. While new works may be created through the use of one or more existing items in the collections (something which should always be encouraged by curators who believe in the archive or museum as a catalyst of invention), their creation will never entail the alteration, manipulation or modification of the collection items.

In this respect, the archivist and the curator are powerful allies, in that they are both committed (the former from the perspective of the custodian of the artefact, the second from that of its interpreter) to the protection and availability of the work in its original form.

A widely shared view among curators in all disciplines – recently echoed by British film director John Boorman apropos Stanley Kubrick's intention to destroy all surviving prints of his first feature film *Fear and Desire* – is that, from an ethical and cultural perspective, when a work becomes part of an archival or museum collection, it no longer belongs to its makers nor to its custodians, but to history and to posterity. Copyright protects the intellectual and financial interests of a creator, but does not give the right to distort history when its material evidence has been consciously put under the care of a collecting organisation. An audiovisual artist who is keen to further modify or dismember the original expressions of his or her past work should do so with copies from the original work, or not give the original work to an archive at all.

In the audiovisual world this means two things: first, no destruction, alteration nor manipulation of the work (even by its author) is allowed if it entails a permanent alteration of the historical record: George Lucas may well recut and put a new soundtrack to his first *Star Wars* movie, but its 1977 version should still exist and be available as such. The second principle, derived from the first, is that no duplication whatsoever of the original work should be made without prior adequate measures to ensure the stability of the collection item. This means, for instance, that a gramophone disc in the collection should not be played before the sound recording has been transferred to another accessible medium, and that a nitrate print should not run through a projector or telecine equipment before having been transferred to another stable component. Access activities should be implemented only on access materials.

The collaborative nature of the relationship between curators and archivists is key to the life of a collecting institution.

ACQUISITION, PRESERVATION, ACCESS: A BALANCE OF POWER

The notion of the equal importance of acquisition, preservation and access in an audiovisual archive is a pivotal feature of the curatorial vision for the NFSA, as defined in the five-point document distributed in late 2004. According to this vision, none of these concepts taken individually should be developed to the detriment of the others. This could be described as something similar to the balance of power between legislative, executive and judiciary in a democratic regime: through a complex system of checks and balances, each component of the political system supports the others and ensures that none of them is allowed to exercise absolute power. While some of them (such as the judicial function) are also expected to act in complete independence from the political party or coalition holding power at a given point in time, all of them obey to agreed rules of the democratic process.

The same applies to the curatorial process, in that acquisition must comply to agreed collection policies which include provisions for preservation and access; the preservation process must take into account the nature of the works acquired and the need to make them permanently accessible; the demands for access to the collections will influence the preservation policies, but cannot alter nor compromise their underlying fundamental values.

The curator is the arbiter of this balance, the person who has the responsibility of ensuring that each of the three components of the process finds its best possible expression, individually and as part of a whole. Curatorship is by all means a heavy practical, political and moral burden, requiring a unique mix of stamina, judgement, strategy, diplomacy, knowledge and vision. To provide an idea of what this entails, let's now look at some of curatorship's most obvious manifestations, formally articulated in the archive's collection policy documents. At first sight, they look more like protocols and practices; however, curatorial values are so deeply embedded in them that it is important to briefly describe them in this context.

ACQUISITION

Curators are responsible for deciding which works will be acquired for the collection. While they are encouraged and often required to use the experience and expertise of other colleagues in their curatorial staff, and to take

into account suggestions coming from other staff members or from outside the archive, they are personally and ultimately accountable for their choices.

They will strive to acquire complete works, in their final and/or commercially released versions, primarily in the media in which they were intended to be experienced by their audiences. The curators also have the sole authority to assess the exceptional circumstances under which it may be advisable or necessary to acquire elements other than complete works (such as rushes, outtakes of moving image works, or unreleased sound recordings), or to acquire works in formats or media other than the original ones, in the event that acquisition of the original works proves to be impossible to achieve.

Other than in the special circumstances described above, curators will decline offers to acquire works in non-original formats or media purely for access purposes, unless a corresponding element of the work in its original format is already part of the collection, and they will notify their supervisors of any undue pressure exercised upon them to act in ways contrary to their mandate.

PRESERVATION

The curator's main mission in relation to the preservation process is to ensure that any preservation work is:

- reversible;
- avoids further alteration of the original work;
- is carefully documented in order to allow others to evaluate the choices made and the procedures chosen, and take corrective action if necessary.

Curators are responsible for deciding, in consultation with their supervisors and the staff in charge of the preservation or conservation facilities, the preservation procedures to be implemented towards the collection as a whole or towards some specific components of the collection. Curators are expected to gather advice from staff in charge of preservation and conservation facilities about the costs of preserving, restoring, duplicating or reconstructing any given work for special purposes, and about the technical implications of their decisions.

Curators are also responsible for ensuring that the works in the collections are preserved according to the highest possible technical and intellectual standards available at the time, and that the works will remain accessible for as long as possible in their original format or media for future generations.

No reproduction, transfer or migration of the original work for preservation or access purposes will be allowed on other formats or media before a work is accessible in its original format or medium, insofar as the original format or medium exists and is available.

ACCESS

Curators are responsible for maintaining permanent accessibility as the ultimate goal of the acquisition and preservation processes. They have overall responsibility for access policy implementation and for coordinating the efforts of other staff, including but not limited to the staff of preservation and technical services. Mindful of the inherent compromise between acquisition, preservation and access, the curators will:

- commit to maintain a clear connection between the display of an audiovisual work and the mission statement of the NFSA;
- ensure that the inclusion of a work in an exhibition or access program is consistent with the intellectual integrity of the exhibition or access program itself;
- provide the widest possible access to the collections through both formal exhibitions and a wide variety of other methods;
- serve as a resource for teaching, research, scholarship, inspiration, entertainment and creation of new works;
- be limited only by good preservation practice, respect for intellectual property rights, and the unique characteristics of each collection.

The NFSA curators have the authority to limit access to works in the collections only in the event that:

- the material is judged to be too fragile to handle;
- the material is extremely valuable and rare;
- the NFSA does not have a preservation master or preservation element of the work;
- the requestor has demonstrated carelessness or has otherwise put collection material in jeopardy during previous instances;
- the requestor refuses to comply with archival policies or procedures;
- there are donor- or depositor-imposed restrictions on access;
- there is insufficient staff available for adequate supervision of access;
- there is risk of damage to, or loss of, the work in the collection.

In addition to responding to access requests, a curator must exercise a proactive role in highlighting the significance of undeservedly neglected works in the collection. Archives and museums often have important items that nobody knows anything about, either because they are not yet catalogued, or because their very existence is virtually unknown.

DEACCESSIONING

Deaccessioning works from the National Collection is a grave decision, which must be evaluated with extreme caution. Curators are responsible for determining, subject to final approval from their supervisors, which elements should be deaccessioned, with a clear and well-documented explanation of the reason for their actions.

In general terms, an item may be deaccessioned from the collection for one or more of the following reasons:

- because the material is decomposed beyond repair, reproduction and/or exhibition, and no meaningful information or audiovisual experience whatsoever can be obtained from it;
- because the NFSA already has other elements of a given work in its original medium and format, and has compared the item with other holdings and determined that it is inferior in all respects;
- because of the excess number of duplicate elements of the work, well beyond the needs of the NFSA for preservation or access purposes;
- in the case of a work created in a non-analog format, because the carrier in which the digital-born work was created can no longer be used.

DATA MANAGEMENT

The collection, organisation and availability of data – implemented through guidelines informed by international standards – affects all the key functions of an archive. The accuracy and availability of these records is a shared goal, and a responsibility for all people involved in creating and capturing information about the collection. Curators, accessioners and cataloguers must agree on data entry standards and the criteria for data quality. The responsibility for management of these standards and criteria lies with the cataloguers and accessioners, while the curator's distinctive strength is in the ongoing provision of the descriptive and contextual data needed to identify an audiovisual work and in the assessment of the intellectual and technical nature of the work. This relationship between curatorial and cataloguing staff is sometimes taken for granted; however,

it is a key ingredient for providing the most appropriate data for the needs of the collecting institution.

WHAT IS AN 'ORIGINAL' ARTEFACT?

As soon as a work becomes part of a national collection, each of its components is *potentially* an 'original' and should be treated with all the care necessary to ensure its survival for future generations. At first sight, this notion contradicts the well-worn theory of 'film in the age of mechanical reproduction', that is, the notion that an audiovisual work may be reproduced indefinitely, especially in the digital domain. However, recent practice has demonstrated that such a notion has its flaws.

No matter how 'common' an audiovisual work is today, if an archive or a museum decides to acquire it for the collection, the curator has the responsibility of determining what the possibilities are of locating another new element of that work, and deciding whether or not it should be used for access purposes.



The Rink (Charlie Chaplin, US 1916)

Thousands of copies of Chaplin's short comedies were produced, but at the time of the first major Chaplin preservation project, it became clear that very few archives, including the Chaplin Estate, had a complete print in good condition of any of these films.

Courtesy of Association Chaplin

As a rule, the 'original' (determined as such by the curator) should never be touched except for the creation of preservation elements; nor should it be assumed that a single access to an 'original' does not compromise its overall integrity. It is possible for an archive to be so technologically advanced as to ensure that an original element can occasionally be made

accessible under strictly monitored curatorial conditions; however, the curator is personally responsible for making the choice.

Take the (analog) example of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, available in a huge number of analog and digital copies. What should an archive do if a copy of this film is part of the collection or may be acquired? The answer depends on the nature of the copy and the curatorial determination of its use. According to film preservationist Robert A. Harris, for many years the Cinémathèque française in Paris had a stunning 35mm print of this title. Convinced that the film was not rare, the film archive's curators projected it on a regular basis in its theatre, and frequently loaned it to other archives, on the assumption that it would be easy to obtain another print in the event that the existing one was damaged or lost. When Harris undertook the restoration of the film on behalf of Universal Pictures, it turned out that the original negative of the film was no longer available in its entirety; that very few vintage prints survived; and more importantly, that the Cinémathèque française print was the only surviving copy of the film in its original VistaVision format. By the time Harris got hold of that print, it was in such poor condition that it could no longer be projected nor used for the restoration project, and the final result of his work is a film with significant differences from the 1959 version.

A similar instance can be found in Charles Chaplin's classic *Keystone*, Mutual and Essanay short comedies. Thousands of copies in all formats were produced since 1915, and film archives never bothered protecting what they had because they thought it would always be possible to acquire new prints. At the time of the first major Chaplin preservation project, it soon became clear that very few archives, including the Chaplin Estate, had a complete print in good condition for any of these comedies. Had we preserved at least one copy of each of them soon after their first release, we would now possess a set of cultural treasures!

The Chaplin example is indirectly linked with the prehistory of the NFSA. In the 1930s a small Sydney distributor, National Films, acquired a set of duplicate negatives of the Chaplin Mutuals with soundtracks – the versions produced by the Van Beuren Corporation. In the 1970s, Dorothy Tayler, the widow of the owner of National Films – which by then had closed – was disposing of the company's stock in trade, and much of it was offered to the National Library. Ms. Tayler offered to the National Library the Chaplin negatives, but the offer had to be declined because of shortage in storage space. The National Library put Ms. Tayler

in touch with the staff of the American Film Institute, who gladly received them. The AFI later claimed that these negatives were the best surviving material on the Chaplin Mutuals. Later, Blackhawk used them as source material for their own releases.

Another example related to recorded sound may further illustrate the point. It was recently discovered that some Edison cylinder recordings can be played back in genuine, if accidental, 'stereo'. Sometimes two acoustic masters were made of the same performance with the horns placed in different positions, so each has a different orchestral balance. The purpose was simply one of productivity – double the output. The masters had the same serial number with an A or B suffix. Someone has now figured out the real significance of the suffix from a modern viewpoint: the idea of stereo would have been commercially impracticable at the time the recording was made, even if it had actually occurred to anyone. If the original carriers had not been kept, no one would ever have made this discovery by listening to copies.

It should not be assumed *a priori* that a digitally created work is immune from this kind of challenge. A *cause célèbre* in this respect was raised by the partial loss of the audiovisual data used in the film *Toy Story* (1995) during the backup process of the digital masters, but there are other common instances of data degradation and loss of information during digital compression. There is an inherent risk in each migration, and the risk is multiplied in the likely event of massive periodical transfers of large amounts of audiovisual data. In essence, curatorial values are independent of the transition from the analog to the digital world.

WHY SHOULD A WORK BE PRESERVED IN ITS ORIGINAL MEDIUM?

As the interpreter of history through the audiovisual collection for the benefit of present and future generations, the curator must ensure that the work is experienced in a form as close as possible to the way it was intended to be seen and/or heard at the time of its creation.

This does not exclude at all the notion that the same work may be also made accessible in other media, as long as:

- a choice is always given (insofar as possible) between the experience of the original medium and of a new one;
- clarity at the intellectual and experience level is provided about the difference between the original presentation of a work and its modern *ersatz*.



Pacman was one of the earliest videogames ever produced, and the experience of playing it is not easy to reproduce without the original technology.

© 1980, 2003 NAMCO LTD.

The videogame *Pacman*, one of the earliest ever produced, offers evidence that a transfer of the original electronic 'content' to a more modern medium does not guarantee by itself future accessibility to this work, as playing the game requires an apparatus endowed with a specific material and environmental identity which is now very hard to represent, even after only a few years since the demise of the game. An author of virtual reality shows was recently invited to exhibit his creations in a German museum. Digital copies of the software had been made; however, it soon became clear that it was impossible to activate the programs without specific accessories such as joysticks, keyboards or other devices no longer available in the market. These objects were eventually found through contacts with private collectors worldwide. In an archive or museum, a curator is responsible for deciding whether or not to be concerned about their collection and preservation.

WHAT DESERVES PRESERVATION?

Archivists and curators have complementary interests in addressing this question. Both from an archival and a curatorial perspective, the answer is clear: as soon as a work is formally put under the responsibility of an archive or a museum, it becomes as important as any other work already in the collection.

This is not to deny that certain works may be highlighted as 'treasures' of a collection; however, from the perspective of the aim to ensure the integrity of the works formally accepted by a collecting body, there are no layers or degrees of citizenship in an archive or museum: insofar as a deliberate decision has been made about their acquisition, a copy of a 2005 'easy listening' music CD is not less important than the earliest recording of a famous Australian soprano. Each deserves to be treated with the same care and according to the same professional standards.

While it is true that some works are more rare than others and that there may not be enough resources to treat all works according to the highest possible standards, these are the standards we should aim at, irrespective of the cultural status of what has been put under our care. Curators and archivists also agree that certain collection items require special precautions, but this by no means contradicts the 'democratic' approach to the maintenance and care of a collection.

Where the curator and the archivist part ways is in the set of intellectual and operational decisions about the choices to be made in order to interpret the collection and about the acquisition, preservation and access priorities to be determined accordingly. Given the scope and size of a national collection, it is very likely that its archivists and curators do not have the technological and financial resources necessary to give adequate exposure to all works at the same time. Moreover, it is in the very nature of curatorial work to exercise the authority and the responsibility necessary to make informed choices within a body of work so vast as to require a hierarchical approach to their treatment. To further pursue the political metaphors, all citizens are deemed to be equal but some of them are chosen to represent the values of a society for a given period of time.

As soon as a work is formally put under the responsibility of an archive or a museum, it becomes as important as any other work already in the collection.

History is the most selective, powerful and often unforgiving curator of the cultural heritage, as it determines (through a series of events ranging from cultural trends and economic influences to wars, genocides and natural catastrophes) what posterity will have an opportunity to experience and what will be bound to disappear forever. The curator doesn't have the same overwhelming power, but he or she has the responsibility to decide what should be preserved first in the historical timeframe within which he or she operates. This prerogative should not be taken lightly, and requires a refined sense of judgment, strategy and opportunity. In giving shape to their vision, curators will give equal weight to a dual set of considerations.

The first is part of a territory shared with the archivist: how soon will the work become inaccessible forever if it is not preserved? In determining the best course of action, both the archivist and the curator will evaluate the collection from a technical standpoint and assess the risk of physical decay of the works in the collection.

The second set of criteria is of a cultural nature: given a number of works equally in need of preservation, which ones should be given priority? Choosing work A instead of B does not mean deliberately condemning B to oblivion: it means declaring that:

- under the present circumstances,
 - given the already existing heritage,
 - in view of a presumed future landscape of the collection and the cultural context surrounding it,
- preservation of A must take priority over treatment of B.

This is by all means a value judgment, the expression of a coherent system of thought, and the curator has a heavy burden in applying it in a responsible manner after consulting with the archivist and the preservation technician, whose knowledge of conservation practices is a necessary prerequisite of any informed curatorial decision.

This is also what makes the curatorial profession so inherently challenging, as it requires a multiplicity of skills, ranging from historical expertise to knowledge in technical and legal matters, and managerial

skills such as the ability to take into account conflicting interests and allocate the efforts and the financial resources in a way that is consistent with the cultural choices he or she has made. It is quite possible, for instance, that the curator may reach the conclusion that a certain collection should immediately be copied into the digital domain because its value is limited to the 'content'. How to make such decision without contradicting or betraying the notion of adherence to the medium is only one of the many challenges facing curatorship in the digital world.

PRESERVING EVERYTHING VS SELECTING

The mandate of the National Film and Sound Archive is to acquire, preserve and make accessible Australian audiovisual heritage (a discussion on the definition of 'audiovisual heritage' may be found in Ray Edmondson, *Audiovisual Archiving, cit.*, p. 22). Ideally, the NFSA should apply this principle to the entire body of works produced in Australia; in other countries in which Australians who had a creative reputation before they left Australia – or who are temporarily abroad – are featured; and by other audiovisual makers in the Australian territory. The NFSA should also apply its efforts to works exhibited or distributed in Australia that have had a significant influence on the cultural life and development of the Australian people. A curatorial selection of foreign audiovisual works is now part of the NFSA's collecting agenda.

In relative terms, the creative audiovisual output in the first category is more modest than in other countries such as India or the United States. However, the exponential growth of works produced through digital technologies makes it extremely difficult to achieve even the first task, both on a practical and a financial level. Bearing this in mind, curators should never lose sight of their ideal goal. They should not only explore every opportunity to come closer to it: they should also prepare the ground for future curators and help them increase their capacity to fulfil the mission of the NFSA.

In the meantime, curatorial decisions must be made as to what portion of the audiovisual heritage can and should be acquired, preserved and made accessible in its entirety. Again, this is a matter of assessing the cultural value of the audiovisual works and their potential significance to posterity within the economic resources currently available. The extreme complexity of this task and of the criteria influencing them defines curatorship as an art. Mindful that these criteria evolve over time, curators are expected to have the professional strength to make difficult choices, and be accountable for them. In doing so, they are assisted by a collection policy document that is periodically revised in order to ensure its consistency with best archival practice. The collection policy is another tool for the achievement of a balance of power within the archive, in that it gives an opportunity to challenge curatorial decisions and to avoid external pressure or interference.

Some indicative yet concrete examples may be of some help in explaining this point. It is fair to assume that a national audiovisual archive should have all the music CDs and all the feature films and television works (with the corresponding scripts) commercially produced in Australia, as they largely determine the cultural reputation of a country and its influence in relation to the economic forces surrounding it. As their number is relatively limited in Australia, this could be seen in theory as a reasonable goal.

Let's also assume that the curators will determine that it is important to acquire, preserve and make accessible all the short films and television programs made in Australia, but that completeness cannot be achieved within the means currently available. In such a case, the curators may want to adopt a dual strategy involving:

- the acquisition of a representative selection of these works, and
- an effort towards the creation of institutional mechanisms for the negotiated or mandatory deposit of these works.

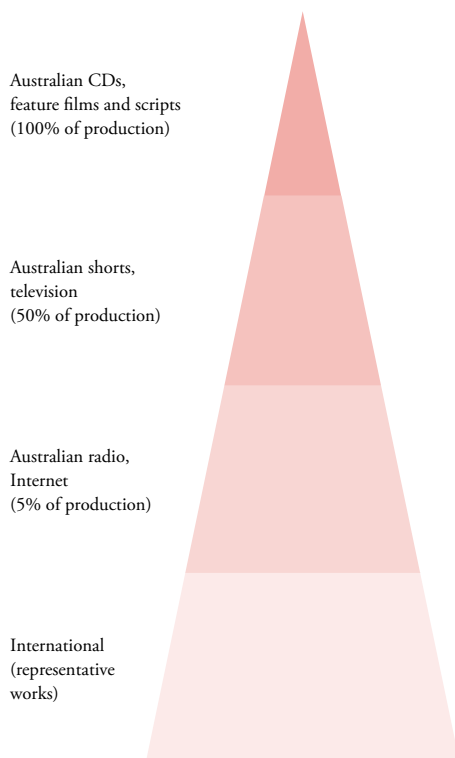
Finally, let's imagine a third layer of audiovisual works including all radio programs and all Internet works produced in Australia, and assume that there is currently no realistic way to acquire them all. In this instance, curators will adopt the same dual strategy, the only difference being that the body of work in question is much larger and the necessary selection process is aimed at acquiring a much smaller percentage of the entire production.

This process may be graphically represented by a pyramid in four or more segments: the top segment describes that part of Australian production which NFSA will commit (under

History is the most selective, powerful and often unforgiving curator of the cultural heritage.

the above hypothesis) to acquire in its entirety every year; the second segment includes that part which can be acquired in a significant percentage; and so forth. At the very bottom of the pyramid there is the galaxy of all audiovisual works produced in the world, from which the curators will pick a limited but meaningful number of rare, unique or representative items.

Example of curatorial decision: acquisitions



Two caveats are in order here. First, the layers in this pyramid are by no means uniform, in that curators should exercise their authority in deciding that a certain cluster of works should be given priority over the others within the same layer (for example, a curator may decide that Indigenous radio programs should be given a higher priority in relation to all the radio programs produced in Australia). Second, the layers of this imaginary pyramid are not fixed in time, and curators must be ready to adapt their acquisition priorities to cultural and practical circumstances and events, and be flexible enough to modify their own acquisition, preservation and access priorities accordingly. The emergence of a new medium, format style, genre or mode of audiovisual experience is an opportunity and a challenge for curators, as they can begin preserving what society hasn't yet deemed worthy of long-term preservation, although they may not possess the conceptual framework necessary to integrate the newborn works within the audiovisual tradition with which they are familiar. (The term 'work' should be used here in its most inclusive

sense. Ideally, an archive should not just acquire discrete programs, recordings or films. It should also be acquiring their context in the same way: for instance, a whole 12-hour or 24-hour slice of the output of television or radio stations on a cyclical basis, so that the context of discrete programs – the television or radio experience – is captured.)

PRESERVING A WORK ALREADY PRESERVED ELSEWHERE

To further complicate matters, there is the fact that a national audiovisual archive is part of a broader community of sister institutions with similar goals and objectives. While this is of course a positive thing, it does not simplify an archive's work in that the boundaries between the responsibilities and prerogatives of the members of the archive, museum and even library community are not clearly defined, and are constantly shifting. In deciding whether or not an audiovisual work in the collection should be fully preserved even if it is already known to be preserved by another institution, the issue of redundancy should be carefully considered.

For many years, prints of films by Satyajit Ray have not been preserved outside India because it was assumed that they had already been protected in their country of origin. This may have been at least partially true; however, a recent incident at a film laboratory destroyed part of the preservation work already done, and archives undertook a desperate search for the few surviving vintage prints. As a result, several Satyajit Ray films available today are the result of a preservation work based on sub-standard elements. The NFSA has recently acquired a 35mm of a film by Alejandro Jodorowsky, the European cut of *Santa Sangre* (1993). This is a very recent film, and yet it is not clear whether or not any major archive in the world holds a projectable copy of Jodorowsky's underrated allegorical work. A curatorial decision would dictate in this case the redefinition of the NFSA copy as a 'master' element, or at least as a print for restricted access.

In curatorial terms, the default option is to treat every unpreserved collection item as a master copy. It is the curator's prerogative, based on his or her knowledge of the preservation history of a given work and the current international context, to decide which kind of audiovisual elements may be moved from the preservation category to the list of works available for access; hence the importance for curators to keep abreast of the activity of their colleagues abroad.

The issue of 'redundancy' may also be examined within a nation's own boundaries. Ray Edmondson has pointed out that the NFSA and the Australian War Memorial have, to some extent, duplicate collections of World War II era Australian newsreels. That's because NFSA received the Cinesound Movietone library, and the AWM acquired the 'official' footage from the then Department of Information as government war records. The holdings are far from identical – there are many subtle differences – but there is overlap. However, the crucial difference is one of perspective and context. The NFSA preserves them as *cinema newsreels*, that is, as part of Australia's wider cinema and newsreel culture and history. The Australian War Memorial preserves them as government war records within a quite different institutional context.

CURATORSHIP AND IDEOLOGY

The curators' responsibility is not limited to the development of a collection according to the current intellectual values of a society. They must also represent values endorsed by cultural, political and religious minorities, or promoted by individuals and groups whose viewpoints are a direct challenge to the predominant trends of the present, or alien to the beliefs of the curators themselves. In operational terms, this means that curators should maintain a clear separation between what 'is' and what 'should be', thus demonstrating an equal degree of commitment to the acquisition of works generally recognised as significant, as well as works which do not correspond to their views or to the common opinion.

A curator who is not keen to acquire, preserve or give access to an audiovisual work because he or she is afraid of being identified with the ideology portrayed in it does a disservice to the field and to society. For instance, the German propaganda documentary *Triumph des Willens* (1934) is a great film and the document of an aberrant ideology. Another cinematic example drawn from the Australian context is *The Birth of White Australia* (1928), an important document on the perception of national identity in the early twentieth century and an aggressively racist film; while taking both perspectives into account in the contextualised presentation of this work, a curator should not prevent an audience from experiencing it because of the curator's own beliefs. The curator's job as an interpreter does not extend to the right to think on behalf of the audience.



The Birth of White Australia (Phillip Walsh, Australia 1928) is both an important document on the perception of national identity in the early 20th century and an aggressively racist film. While taking both perspectives into account in the contextualised presentation of this work, a curator should not prevent an audience from experiencing it because of the curator's own beliefs.

NFSA Collection; title no. 594224

By the same token, the curator is responsible to posterity in that he or she must possess the vision and sense of history necessary to imagine what the audience of a distant and therefore unimaginable future may ask of a collection of national significance. The measure of success of a curator's endeavour is far more than the mere notion of 'completeness'; it is the recognition from posterity that he or she has anticipated needs which were not immediately foreseen at the time and in the context of the curator's professional life. Hence the ongoing question curators must constantly ask themselves: is there an aspect of today's culture which is being totally neglected but may become significant, useful or necessary to the audience of tomorrow?

There are successful artists who have occasionally produced works generally dismissed by contemporary audiences: these are the works the curator should aim at first, because the likelihood that they will be lost is comparatively high. When deciding preservation priorities, curators will pay attention not only to those works, media and formats which are in greater demand, but also to those which may be deemed to be of significant cultural value in the future and which are not necessarily perceived as such by the current dominant taste. The ideal goal of the curator of a national audiovisual collection is the awareness that no stone has been left unturned to draw an understandable compelling portrait of the society where he or she lives, giving appropriate weight to the mainstream and the independent, to the consensus and the creative marginality, to the canon and its meaningful subversion.

A curator is like a cultural antenna, in that she or he must constantly monitor and participate in the developments of audiovisual creation in order to readily adapt or modify the current acquisition policies

In 1905, the destruction of films, phonograph and the printed scores of operettas was seen not only as inevitable; it was taken for granted, very much as happened with newspapers. Film and popular music were not considered as cultural works, let alone as forms of artistic expression. Those who saved early films from destruction were inadvertently the first curators of the audiovisual world; similarly, those who kept cylinder phonographs after the advent and overwhelming success of the gramophone record made an unconscious curatorial decision: they saved what society deemed unnecessary, thus creating the conditions for their availability to posterity. The same criteria ought to be applied today to more recent media and formats: is there a virtual reality museum? How many institutions preserve the hardware necessary to operate a 1984 videogame?

A curator is like a cultural antenna, in that she or he must constantly monitor and participate in the developments of audiovisual creation in order to readily adapt or modify the current acquisition policies. In qualitative terms, the growth of a national audiovisual archive is not a linear process. Its development criteria must be constantly verified against the principles and practices of the audiovisual culture and its modes of production, so that the manifestations and the consequences of changes still undetected by the majority are promptly incorporated into the fabric of the collection policies. In their exploring the opportunities and challenging the limits presented by these policies, curators act like the cultural meteorologists of a collecting institution.

*PAOLO CHERCHI USAI, Director of the National Film and Sound Archive, Australia, is co-founder of the Pordenone Silent Film Festival and of the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation at George Eastman House. His experimental film **Passio** will premiere at the 2007 Adelaide Film Festival.*

APPENDIX: THE ETHICS OF CURATORIAL PRACTICE

The following is adapted from John M.A. Thompson *et al.*, *Manual of Curatorship* (London: Butterworth, 1986), pp. 530-537.

1. MANAGEMENT AND CARE OF THE COLLECTIONS

- 1.1. It is a curator's duty to take all possible steps to ensure that a written acquisition policy is adopted by the governing body of his/her archive. It is therefore his/her duty to recommend revisions of that policy at regular intervals. He/she must ensure that the policy, as formally adopted and revised by the governing body, is implemented, and ensure that his/her colleagues are fully acquainted with it.
- 1.2. It is a curator's primary responsibility to do all in his/her power to fully protect all items in his/her care against physical deterioration whether on display, in store, subject to research or conservation procedures or on loan elsewhere. A curator must apprise his/her supervisor of the recommendations made to him/her by specialists in the field and enforce all safeguards subsequently adopted.
- 1.3. All items within a curator's care must be recorded, including the circumstances and conditions of acceptance and such other information as is necessary to complement the object, in an appropriate, secure and permanent form capable of easy retrieval.
- 1.4. There must always be a strong presumption against the disposal of specimens to which an archive has assumed formal title. Any form of disposal, whether by donation, exchange, sale or destruction requires the exercise of a high order of curatorial judgement and should be recommended to a curator's supervisor only after full expert and legal advice has been taken.
- 1.5. A curator may not delegate curatorial functions to persons who lack the appropriate knowledge and skill.
- 1.6. A curator must never discourage legitimate research into the collections under his/her care by those qualified to perform it.

- 1.7. All research undertaken in the archive should relate to the institution's collections or objectives.
- 1.8. A curator has a clear duty to consult professional colleagues outside his/her own institution when his/her expertise and that of his/her immediate colleagues are insufficient to ensure the welfare of items in the collection under his/her care.

2. ACCESSIBILITY OF DATA

- 2.1. It is a curator's responsibility to safeguard the confidentiality of sensitive data contained in the records which he/she maintains. Sensitive data consists of information to which uncontrolled access might put at risk rare, unique or vulnerable material and of personal details and statements the disclosure of which could lead to legal action. A curator may disclose such information only to enquirers whose reputations, interests and intentions he/she has established beyond reasonable doubt to be consistent with the needs of conservation.

3. PERSONAL ACTIVITIES

- 3.1. The acquiring, collecting and owning of objects by a curator for his/her own private collection is not in itself unethical, but it should be discouraged. Serious dangers are implicit when a curator or his/her staff collects for themselves privately objects similar to those which he/she and others collect for his/her archive. In particular, no curator or curatorial staff should compete with their institution either in the acquisition of objects or in any personal collecting activity. Extreme care must be taken to ensure that no conflict of interest arises.
On his/her appointment, a curator or the member of a curatorial staff with a private collection must provide his/her supervisor with a description of it, and a statement of his/her collecting policy. Any agreement between a curator and his/her supervisor on matters concerning his/her private collection must be scrupulously kept.

- 3.2. On no account may a curator solicit a personal gift or bequest from a member of the public.
- 3.3. Dealing (buying and selling for a profit) in material which is collected by the curator's institution is an unacceptable practice for all curators and their staff.
- 3.4. A curator must be fully aware that to undertake identification and authentication outside his/her duties for personal gain with the intention of establishing the market value of an object, is fraught with danger. If it is to be done, a curator must declare such intention beforehand to his/her supervisor, and be at pains to observe the highest standards of academic objectivity.
- 3.5. A curator is not normally qualified to undertake valuations and must therefore be aware of any implications of using his/her position for direct or indirect personal profit. In the course of his/her duties, a curator will, from time to time, be required to have regard to the financial value of objects. In such circumstances he/she must always pay attention to the possible implications arising from this practice.
- 3.6. A curator must obtain the written consent of his/her supervisor before undertaking private work from which personal financial gain may accrue. Even when consent has been obtained, such activities should not be allowed to interfere with the discharge of his/her official duties and responsibilities.

4. RESPONSIBILITIES AND SERVICES TO THE PUBLIC

- 4.1. The acquisition of archive items from members of the public must be conducted with scrupulous fairness to the seller or donor.
- 4.2. Although circumstances exist wherein a curator may refuse to identify an object, as a general rule he/she is expected to do so when, in the course of his/her employment, he/she is asked by a member of the public. A curator must not withhold significant facts about the object or deliberately mislead the enquirer. If a curator's knowledge of the object is incomplete, this should also be stated.

- 4.3 In compliance with the UNESCO *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*, a curator must not identify, accept on loan or acquire by any means, an object which he/she has good reason to believe was acquired by its current owner in contravention of the terms of that Convention, or by any other illegal means.
- 4.4 A curator must not reveal information imparted to him/her in confidence during the course of his/her professional duties (see also 2.1).
- 4.5 Archive objects on public display, with all forms of accompanying information, should present a clear, accurate and balanced exposition and must never deliberately mislead. These principles apply also to books and information published or otherwise disseminated by the archive.
- 4.6 Material sold in the archive shop should be of a standard and nature relevant to and compatible with the aims and objectives of the archive service.
- 4.7 The curation of material of ritual significance is a sensitive undertaking and a curator must be aware of the possible impact of such activity on humanistic feelings or religious beliefs. He/she must therefore take all reasonable steps to avoid giving rise to public outrage or offence in his/her management of such material.
- 4.8 In cases where his/her professional advice is sought, a curator must ensure that such advice is consistent with archival or museological principles and as far as possible in the best interests of the enquirer.

5. RELATIONSHIP WITH COMMERCIAL ORGANISATIONS

- 5.1 It will often be a legitimate part of a curator's duty to work with commercial organisations, whether they be vendors, suppliers, producers, distributors, exhibitors, auctioneers or dealers, in respect of possible acquisitions, potential sponsors, or the media (press, radio, television). However, in all such dealings, a curator must never accept from such sources a personal gift in whatever form which might subsequently be interpreted, whether rightly or wrongly, as an inducement

to trade with one organisation to the exclusion of others. Equally, in the course of his/her duties, should a curator be asked to advise a member of the public on an appropriate commercial organisation to be approached, the utmost care must be taken to ensure that no personal prejudice could subsequently be inferred from such advice.

- 5.2 In the area of industrial sponsorship, there will be an agreed relationship between the archive and the sponsor, and a curator must ensure that the standards and objectives of the archive are not compromised by such a relationship.
- 5.3 When providing information for the media, a curator must ensure that it is factually accurate and, wherever possible, enhances the reputation of the archive (see also 4.5).

6. RELATIONSHIP WITH PROFESSIONAL COLLEAGUES

- 6.1 A curator's relationship with professional colleagues should always be courteous, both in public and private. Differences of professional opinion should not be expressed in a personal fashion. Particular care must be taken to avoid any dispute coming to public notice so as to bring discredit on the persons concerned and the profession at large.
- 6.2 When acquisition policies and collecting areas overlap, the curators concerned should draft a mutually satisfactory agreement. This should then be referred to the governing bodies concerned for approval, either as a substantive change or as an appendix to their acquisition policies. Where conflict with other archives over the acquisition of an object is likely, curators must take all possible steps to ensure that the issue is amicably resolved.
- 6.3 In the course of his/her duties, a curator forms working relationships with numerous other people, both professional and otherwise, within and outside the archive in which he is employed. A curator is expected to conduct these relationships with courtesy and fair-mindedness and to render his/her professional services to others efficiently and at a high standard.

RESEARCH FELLOWSHIPS

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

The Centre for Scholarly and Archival Research (CSAR) at the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) has been established to encourage and facilitate research into Australia's historic and contemporary moving image and recorded sound culture.

The NFSA is seeking applications from established researchers and audiovisual practitioners with a record of significant achievement for the inaugural **CSAR Research Fellowships**.

Senior academics, scholars, writers, filmmakers, artists and archival professionals from Australia and overseas are encouraged to apply. The fellowships involve a residency at the NFSA in Canberra, with accommodation supplied. Fellows can use the NFSA's collections to stimulate or otherwise inform an academic publication, a new sound or moving image work, or a live event.

Applications for the inaugural fellowships close **30 November 2006**.



**NATIONAL
FILM
& SOUND
ARCHIVE**

Further information including application forms can be found at www.nfsa.afc.gov.au/csar

FROM THE EDITOR

A collection of artworks constitutes only one half of the treasures of an archive or a museum. The other half is the expertise, the scholarship, the creativity of those who work in the organisation. Creativity provides meaning, understanding, interpretation to what would otherwise be perceived as mere content, the equivalent of a product on the shelves of a cultural supermarket. The National Film and Sound Archive has given itself a new structure based on the principle of curatorship, precisely because it believes that a dynamic interaction between the collecting institution and the public is a key element of its mandate.

This journal is the expression of our commitment to develop such dialogue through the discussion of recorded sound and moving image culture from an archival perspective. We will do so without any concession to nostalgia, technical jargon, or theoretical elitism. Our aim is to make the work of the NFSA – acquiring, preserving and presenting moving images and sound recordings – accessible to a wider audience. We will be open to all kinds of scholarly and intellectual perspectives, as long as their underlying ideas are expressed clearly and in good faith.

The four collections of the NFSA (Documents and Artefacts, Indigenous, Moving Image, Recorded Sound), as well as the philosophical rationale behind its activities, will be our main areas of concern, and the NFSA curatorial team will be directly engaged in the development of the journal. However,

we will be open to other contributions from colleagues, students and practitioners in the field. There will be no geographic boundaries, no chronological barriers, no off-limits territories of curatorial research. More importantly, we don't have to agree with what's being published in our pages. Even in the areas of recorded sound and screen culture, we firmly believe that the most desirable cultural landscape is the one where freedom of debate is seen as important as consensus.

We are deliberately starting on a small scale. This doesn't mean that we don't have ambitions for the future of our journal; however, its success will depend on our ability to demonstrate that our work can speak to specialists and non-specialists with equally compelling arguments. We see no reason why a technical paper should make itself inaccessible to someone who is interested in the topic but is unfamiliar with technology; conversely, we don't believe that a subject is too popular to deserve curatorial attention.

What matters to us is being able to convince that an archive of moving images and recorded sounds can be the coolest thing on earth if you open its doors with curiosity and enthusiasm. True knowledge always begins with a sense of surprise.

PAOLO CHERCHI USAI
Director, National Film and Sound Archive

True knowledge
always begins with
a sense of surprise.

NFSA Journal **Journal of the National Film** **and Sound Archive, Australia**

Volume 1, No. 1, Spring 2006

ISSN 1834-0970

© Australian Film Commission

The National Film and Sound Archive
is part of the Australian Film Commission

The National Film and Sound Archive is
a member of the International Federation
of Film Archives (FIAPF), and of the
International Association of Sound and
Audiovisual Archives (IASA)



Editor – Paolo Cherchi Usai

Editorial Board – Meg Labrum,
Ann Landrigan

Curatorial Advisors – David Boden, Matthew
Davies, Michael Lim, Elizabeth McNiven,
Graham Shirley

Technical Advisors – Ian Gilmour,
Joe Kelly, Mick Newnham, David Watson

Design – Zoo Design

Production – AFC Communications

The NFSA Journal is published quarterly.
If you would like to subscribe, please contact
us at journal@nfsa.afc.gov.au



**NATIONAL
FILM
& SOUND
ARCHIVE**

www.nfsa.afc.gov.au