

December 2017

Digital Film Preservation: The Search for the Original

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Recommended Citation

Skare, Roswitha (2017) "Digital Film Preservation: The Search for the Original," *Proceedings from the Document Academy*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/docam/vol4/iss2/8>

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1. Introduction

The transition from photochemical to digital has without doubt profoundly affected filmmaking and film distribution. But digitization also has consequences to the preservation and exhibition of films produced in the analogue era. The advantages of digitization of film are obvious: the audience gets easy access to a digital copy and, at the same time, the photochemical original (or what is left of it) can be stored in optimal temperature and humidity conditions for long-term preservation. Not only has digitization contributed to new possibilities for film scholars to study films, it has also made old films available to a broader public. Travelling to archives or film festivals is no longer a necessity when we can get hold of a film on DVD, Blu-ray, or even by online streaming. This of course is a process that already started with videotape in the 1970s. When it comes to films from the silent era, digitization most often not only means a simple transformation from analogue to digital for easier access or for preservation, but also often includes restoration and reconstruction, since photochemical material decays in different physical and chemical ways. Even if it is generally accepted today that film restoration always will be a kind of reconstruction and interpretation where choices have to be made, it is nevertheless considered a process that aims for a result as close as possible to its original.¹

In the following, I will ignore current debates on the impact of digitization on the film medium – for instance if digitization means the end of film and cinema as we know it or not – or questions about the life time of digital film, digital restoration tools etc. My main concern will be on the consequences of digitization of silent films in our search for the original. To illustrate my argument, I will use Robert J. Flaherty's first film, *Nanook of the North*, a classic, silent film that premiered at the Capitol Theatre in New York City in the summer of 1922. As shown elsewhere (Skare 2016) *Nanook of the North*, today considered a classic of the silent era, exists at least in 4 different versions from the English speaking world alone: besides the different screenings of 1922 with different musical scores and surrounding programs we can study a sound version from 1947, the restored version from the 1970s and later editions on VHS, DVD, and Blu-ray, all with different prefaces and different film music in addition to some extra material. My main concern in this paper will be on the consequences of digitization of silent films in our search for the original.

2. Where is the original?

Today's audiences can get hold of *Nanook of the North* relatively easily and inexpensively as a DVD, or access the film in online archives such as the

¹ Cf. for instance Paolo Cherchi Usai's definition: "RESTORATION is the set of technical, editorial and intellectual procedures aimed at compensating for the loss or degradation of the moving image artifact, thus bringing it back to a state as close as possible to its original condition." (Usai 2000, 66)

Internet Archive or on YouTube.² Presumably those viewers willing to pay for the film will prefer the *Criterion Collection* DVD, as this series has established a certain reputation for presenting films of historical importance in good quality. Although the film's elaborate restoration procedure has been described (for example, David Shepard (Shepard 1980, 348) has been able to show how difficult it is to speak of the original of a historic film such as *Nanook* without taking into account its various versions) the back cover of the DVD by *Criterion* promises viewers "the original director's cut, restored to the proper frame rate and tinted according to Flaherty's personal print."

Due to the mechanical reproducibility of film, which was discussed by Walter Benjamin as early as in 1936 (Benjamin 2004), it is difficult or even impossible to talk about the original of a film in a sense comparable to paintings or sculptures. Talking about the original director's cut is, as Janna Jones argues, an "attempt to replicate the conditions of an original" (Jones 2012, 147) when it comes to film. A film's premiere is another attempt in the same direction. When it comes to films from the silent era, both attempts are problematic, as I will show in the following.

2.1. The director's cut

When talking about the director's cut, we are thinking about the edited version of a film that is supposed to represent the director's own approved version. The trend of releasing alternate cuts of films became prominent in the 1970s, and one might argue that with the rise of home video and later DVD, the phrase became more generically used as a marketing term. The director's cut is often a cut where deleted scenes are added back in, making the director's cut longer than the final one. The director's cut is close to what Giovanna Fossati calls the conceptual film artifact, "the one the filmmaker originally conceived, before it was altered by the production company or cut by the censor" (Fossati 2012, 552).

Dealing with films from the silent era like *Nanook*, there are several difficulties. Even if there is the large Flaherty archive at Columbia University in NYC, there are almost no sources about Flaherty's intention and about the editing process. We know only that Flaherty together with Carl Stearns Clancy, the editor of the very successful Pathé News series of news reels, was editing and titling the film during the spring of 1922 in New York City (cf. Christopher 2005, 383), but we do not know whether Flaherty was a leading figure in that process or not. In addition, we have even more trouble when looking for the filmmakers intentions, because both "filmmakers, producers, and exhibitors all handled projection prints very freely and created multiple versions" (Fossati 2012, 552) during the silent period. As Ross Melnick shows in his study on Samuel 'Roxy' Rothafel, motion picture exhibitors such as Roxy played an important role in

² A search on YouTube reveals several uploads of the film.

the presentation and promotion of films from the silent era (cf. also Groskopf, 2012, 84). Not only were they able to decide which films were shown; they made decisions on the film music and incorporated individual films into a larger program. Film exhibitors could even alternate the narration like Roxy did in many cases (cf. Melnick 2012, 193).

2.2. The film's premiere

The film's premiere or "the film as it was originally shown to the audience" (Fossati 2009, 117) would be extremely difficult concept for films from the silent era. Each audience experienced different versions of the premiere from theater to theater and from performance to performance. We are also missing source material, such as reviews, in most of the cases that could help us to reconstruct the film as it was shown originally, including projection time, the size of the orchestra and the music chosen to accompany the film, the surrounding program, the building and its decorations, and the advertisements for related products in nearby stores are some of the elements that could vary to a large degree.. Even in cases like *Nanook* with a very extensive archive of material on the film's premiere, we can only make qualified assumptions about what the audience might have experienced. Every viewing of a silent film was therefore more a "one-time performance" (Hansen 1991, 93) than an identical repetition of the film. Audiences in large deluxe theaters probably experienced the 'same' film rather differently than audiences in small cinemas in rural areas or in the neighborhood theaters because of the different surroundings and the different programming details. Talking about the film as it was originally shown to the audience might also include the original format of the film and, closely related to its materiality, the original film's look.

2.3. Film as a material or technological artifact

That brings us to film as a material or technological artifact (Fossati 2009, 57). Materially, the camera negative can be considered the original. The original camera negative (nitrate negative or safety duplicate positive) has often gone missing or was never archived, and for silent films we have, at best, a projection print. And even if we had access to these original camera negatives, for instance for *Nanook*, we would probably notice that important parts of what we today consider natural parts of a film like opening credits and for silent films intertitles are missing. Title cards were inserted and colours added to the negative in the editing process and could again vary from exhibition to exhibition.

2.4. The film's textual level

Last but not least we can talk about the original information of a film or a film's textual level "where its integrity is measured in terms of completeness and continuity" (Fossati 2009, 117) meaning, for instance, the correct sequence of scenes, title cards, and credits. When talking about the original film, we probably most often have this concept in mind. As described by David Shepard, who restored *Nanook* in the 1970s, the situation for silent films is often

challenging because of naturally decomposed and burned (such as what happened to much highly-flammable nitrate stock) materials. In the case of *Nanook*, frames had to be removed, new shots were added, the length of titles were changed, and a new soundtrack was added to the images (cf. Shepard 1989). Since he did not document every restoration decision, we can only assume that Shepard did the best possible job in restoring *Nanook*, using all materials available at that time from archives around the world, and that the restored version is “a *Nanook* whose visual composition, timing and sequence match as closely as possible the original film” (Dobi 1977, 8). Nevertheless, a film restorer is confronted with many choices, and another restorer might have made different choices than Shepard. What is striking is the choice of music made by the Trustee Music Committee for that restored version during the 1970s. According to Steve Dobi, a film historian, there were three different possibilities for film music accompanying the film:

When the Trustee Music Committee first met, they considered three approaches to the problem of adding an original music score to a film classic:

- 1) A score that would sound like the music actually heard by a 1922 movie audience. (This approach was rejected because there was no record of the original score, only a cue sheet,³ and because of a hesitation that an attempt to re-create 1922 movie music would have the effect of making *Nanook of the North* quaint).
- 2) A more traditional Western Symphonic score. (This was rejected not only because of the high cost of an orchestral recording, but because aesthetically *Nanook* seemed to require smaller instrumentation.)
- 3) A contemporary score composed for a small instrumental group on the basis that the film was still alive in 1976, and not simply an antique with archival value alone. (Dobi 1977, 14).

The Committee chose the third option: a contemporary score by Stanley Silverman.⁴ A closer look at these three different options discussed by the Trustee Music Committee are interesting in our search or quest for the original version. Finding the film’s images is considered essential; finding an exact

³ On this, cf. also Dobi 1977, 11: “Monica Flaherty Frassetto, Flaherty’s youngest daughter, still has a cue sheet for the film. She has also done research on the film and her research indicates that there may have been an original score composed in Italy for a screening there. Often when the film was shown by Frances, she experimented with accompaniment by Beethoven, Bach, Debussy and more modern composers.”

⁴ For information about Silverman cf. http://www.stanleysilverman.com/index_NNBH.html, accessed December 12, 2017.

match to the original music is considered less so to the extent of being avoided during the restoration of the film. Old-fashioned music may be considered an element distracting to a modern audience, much more than old images are. In addition to new music, new credits were made and a new foreword inserted, possibly to give the audience a kind of historical context for the film.

3. Conclusion

For films from the silent era that have undergone restoration and digitization, the notion of the *original* becomes an even more abstract idea as pointed out by Jana Jones:

Moving image restoration moves away from the cultural belief that restoration references an original single artifact. The *original* film is not a material object; rather, it is a conceptualization of an artifact. To be specific: it is an idea of a film that existed prior to its first projection. (Jones 2012, 147)

Nevertheless, the framework “film as original” is one “central to film archival practice” (Fossati 2009, 71), discussing both material and textual variations. While digitization always will lead to material variations, the discussion of textual variations is often limited to the completeness and correct sequence of scenes within the film, ignoring changes in the film’s paratext, including the importance of exhibition mode and film music during the silent era. But this was already the case for analogue restoration. Digitization, one might argue, has actually increased the awareness about the changing materiality, including the awareness of the restorer’s responsibility. One reason for this might be, as pointed out by Giovanna Fossati, that digital restoration tools are more effective, having the potential to simulate, for instance, the original look of a silent film:

The restorer is charged with a greater responsibility as new digital tools offer more choices with respect to the extent of intervention, for example, they allow the easy addition or removal of image elements, e.g. a misplaced shadow, due to “wrong” scene lighting, or a director of photography that by mistake briefly invaded the background of the shot. (Fossati 2009, 72)

The lack of reference to the 1922 film shown to the first audience can be a problem when thinking about restoring a silent film, for how *exactly* did the film originally look and sound? How much flicker was there on the original moving picture and how much should modern restoration change or improve the flicker? What happened to the colours? The knowledge of the historical context is important and could help us some, but the choices made during a restoration will always be an interpretation based on the best knowledge. In addition, many films from the silent era survived only in fragments. For example, most of the

Norwegian feature films before 1920 very few moving images are preserved. For the lost films, printed sources like stills, programmes, advertisements, posters and record books are the only sources available about the film itself. How can we know how these films actually looked or how the audience responded? And even for films like *Nanook* with an extensive archive material available, many questions remain open and unanswered.

One might argue that digital restoration leads to new problems when it comes to our search for the original. Analogue restoration resulted in the creation of a new version. As mentioned above, digitization actually might have heightened our awareness of the problematic concept of film as an original. But I would argue that modern digital technology has not yet been used to give the viewer different choices, for instance when it comes to film music. It should be effortless to make a film like *Nanook* available with what might have been the music score from its premiere in 1922 together with more modern compositions. Even if today's spectator has different experiences and expectations than the audience in 1922, today's audience could at least appreciate the combination of the images with different sounds which might result in fairly different experiences.

Considering the storage capacity of Blu-ray, why not include a range of extra materials like film posters, advertisements etcetera used during the history of the film, giving today's audience an historical context about how the film was advertised and viewed during the last century. In cases like *Nanook of the North* supported by an extensive amount of research, we could imagine the possibility of be able to choose accompanying commentary about the history of the film and/or about the restoration and the choices made during the restoration process. Different versions should not be considered a problem or "a form of textual corruption" (Bryant 2013, 50), but rather they are different historical documents giving us information about a particular time and its restoration practice.

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NANOOK OF THE NORTH

Production: France: Revillon Frères; USA: Pathe Exchange

Script, instruction, and photo: Robert J. Flaherty

Intertitles written by: Carl Stearns Clancy or Robert J. Flaherty

Duration: 75 minutes

World premiere: 11.6.1922 at the *Capitol Theatre*, New York City

Restoration: David Shepard (1980)