

Original Copies: Preservation and Promotion Strategies for Archival Film Materials in the Digital Age.

Research Context

My research is located within the field of film restoration and preservation: rooted in the debate surrounding the digitization of film archival material, my project has a twofold goal. On the one hand, it aims at formulating a theoretical framework of the issue, which will be explored with the help of other artistic and historical disciplines. Film restoration, be it analog or digital, always produces a duplicate copy: the experience of disciplines in which the relationship between copy and original has been debated for decades is therefore key for a productive discussion. My second objective is the creation of practical and methodological instruments for preserving and promoting analog film heritage in the digital era, with the goal of streamlining the documentation phase in the film restoration workflow and allowing the preservation also of those elements that are not duplicated in the restoration process. This goal is in line with the objectives formulated by the Piano Nazionale per la Ricerca 2021-2027, which posits documentation as a priority in any activities geared toward cultural heritage conservation and promotion (PNR 2021-2027, p. 8).

The introduction of digital technology in film preservation practices has been alternatively saluted with enthusiasm or treated with skepticism: in fact, while digital tools allow for new restoration and access strategies, they also, for different reasons, endanger the survival of film heritage for future generations. Several studies have been devoted to the transition from analog to digital technology, but they mostly focus on two aspects: the digital restoration of analog copies and the long-term preservation of audiovisual files. Less studied is a third aspect, which is at the core of my research: the fate of archival material that has been rendered obsolete by the introduction of digital technology. Preservation copies are in fact just the tip of the iceberg of film archival collections, which are made up of thousands of prints whose current use is limited to their function as duplication sources or, in rare cases, as projection prints during specialized events. Yet, every copy of a film presents unique technological characteristics and meaningful traces that cannot be duplicated: in this sense, every copy is an original insofar as it is a testimony of the industrial history that produced it and of the cultural history that it traversed, and therefore constitutes an irreplaceable source for research.

Analog film materials are fragile and easily damaged, which makes their direct access difficult and risky. Besides, film copies are bound to decay and eventually decompose because of the very nature of the material with which they are manufactured. It is therefore necessary to not only formulate a theoretical framework, complete with case studies, to define their function and usefulness besides projection or use as a source for duplication; but also to identify protocols and shared platforms for the safeguard of their nature as documents and for a safe access on the part of a broader audience of researchers, students, or simple amateurs. To do this, it is key to promote partnerships among archives, museums, Universities and preservation laboratories, in order to facilitate the exchange of competencies and identify common goals that may benefit not only the institutions, but also the people who turn to them.

The promotion of archival film as a source for historiographical research also has positive repercussions on teaching. Getting students familiar with the study of the material nature of film through archival material allows them to have a more comprehensive understanding of film history through the micro-history embodied in every copy. Besides, learning film preservation practices and principles allows them to familiarize early with a highly specialized profession: this is another reason why it is key to foster partnerships among different institutions, in order to not only create a network of exchange for the students to navigate, but also to formulate shared learning objectives that take into account the needs and the peculiarities of every institution.

Given these premises, my research aims at the following goals:

- To formulate a theoretical and historical framework of the issue of digitization of analog film archival materials, with the contribution of other artistic discipline's experience on the relationship between original and copy;
- To strengthen and broaden the collaboration network among local Universities, archives, museums, and labs, and to link it to similar networks already present on the national territory and abroad;
- To bridge the gap between the analog artifact and its digitization by preserving and promoting film archival materials through the creation of a national database for collecting documentation on each film restoration work;

- To promote non-canonical collections, often stored outside of proper archival institutions (for instance, artists' private collections or home movies);
- To create educational experiences in the field of film preservation through the teaching of classes and the promotion of internships.

Methodology

My project's nature is interdisciplinary, as it is located within archival studies but adopts methodologies derived from media archaeology, digital humanities, and media pedagogy. In different ways, each of these disciplines tackles the issue of archival materials: my research inherits these models' methodological instruments while adapting them to the context of film archives.

With media archaeology, my project has in common the emphasis on the material nature of archival objects; however, while media archaeology tries to understand new technologies by examining older ones, I adopt the opposite strategy by rereading obsolete media through the lens of the changes operated on them by contemporary ones. From digital humanities, my research inherits the use of digital tools for humanistic advancement, while however departing from the quantitative approach that has been hegemonic in the discipline in favor of a qualitative one, more attuned to the traditional humanities and with the nature of archival materials as unique and original objects.

The pedagogical part of my research is based on theories of experiential learning, that is, learning through practical experience, which does not exclude the rigor of traditional teaching but integrates it with the direct application of the learned principles, to show their complexity and facilitate their retention. Archival work is a privileged field for the application of this methodology, as it allows students to familiarize with the methods of historiographic archival research and with the practical activities of a profession, that of the film archivist, that is highly specialized and yet not valued enough. If in fact some schools and Master's programs in film preservation do exist, the discipline is still poorly represented in Bachelor's programs. For this reason, the Association of Moving Image Archivists advocates for the teaching of film archiving to BA students (AMIA: 2019), which would facilitate the entrance in the profession for low-income students with more diverse backgrounds.

My pedagogical research and teaching experience in the U.S. fostered the creation of a project for teaching media archiving and preservation to film students at the University of Colorado, Boulder, in collaboration with the University archives, regional archives and museums, and local laboratories. This project was awarded a \$187.585 grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services, the governmental agency promoting archival activities in the United States. This project could be replicated in Italy as well, through the creation of local partnership networks and the strengthening of existing ones. For instance, Friuli-Venezia Giulia offers an excellent example in this sense, thanks to the collaboration between the Università degli Studi di Udine, the “La camera ottica” lab, and regional film archives. Similarly, Piemonte offers several exchange opportunities among Universities, archives (Museo Nazionale del Cinema di Torino, Archivio Cinematografico della Resistenza, Archivio Nazionale del Cinema d’Impresa di Ivrea), and labs, which in some cases belong to the archives themselves. These collaborations are key toward teaching, preserving, and promoting film archival materials, as outlined in the following section.

Research outcomes

- *Creation of a protocol for documenting film restoration works.*
 - That of documentation is a key stage in any restoration workflow, as it allows for the reconstruction of the technical and editorial steps taken and for the reversibility of the restoration itself. The International Federation of Film Archives’ best practices indicate that “Any restoration process should be documented as precisely as possible; such documentation should be retained by the archive and made accessible along with the elements derived from the restoration” (FIAF: 2009). However, a shared protocol outlining how to record this documentation does not exist at the moment. The creation of such an instrument would streamline the reporting phase and would make the documentation more consistent across archives.
- *Creation of a national database of restoration-related documentation.*

- Access to restoration-related documentation on the part of researchers is not always easy: a national database would facilitate it, in addition to affording an instrument to share competencies and results. Besides, this database would make accessible the film prints used as sources for the duplication process through the digital reproduction of their main characteristics. This would allow for the documentation of the materials used for the restoration work as well, thus emphasizing the uniqueness of each copy that, at the moment, is relegated to the archive's shelves. The models to follow in this sense are “Italia Taglia”, a Ministry of Culture initiative that promoted, among other things, the creation of a database of film censorship documents, thus encouraging research on the topic; and the “Timeline of Historical Film Colors” (<https://filmcolors.org/>), a database of different film color technologies made possible by an ERC Advanced Grant.
- Creation of a website, linked to the national database, for collecting digital reproductions of non-reproducible elements in film copies.
 - With this repository, also copies not used in restoration workflows would be made accessible and observable in their uniqueness. This would also allow for the implementation of broader modes of participation, by inviting non-institutional subjects (collectors, artists, or citizen in general) to contribute to the database. The models in this sense are those of collaborative description, experimented by the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision from 2009 (Noordegraaf: 2020), and of “Home Movie Days,” an international initiative that, every year, invites citizens to share their home movies.
- Identification of learning goals for film preservation classes, and creation of protocols for the evaluation of the results.
 - That of the film archivist is an accredited profession, as one of the six archival training paths identified by D.M. 87/2009. A more widespread teaching of the discipline may further the synergy among the institutions, the accrediting bodies, and the industry, thus providing models of exchange that can be replicated internationally.

- *Organization of an interdisciplinary symposium on the theme “Original and Copy in Cinema and in the Fine Arts.”*
 - The experience of disciplines in which the relationship between original and copy has been studied since ancient times is key to examine the issue of film archival materials and to formulate a theoretical framework. A symposium is the best way to bring together scholars from different disciplines for a productive exchange.
- *Drafting of a book on the relationship between original and copy in film archival materials.*
 - The results of my research will be used to formulate a theory of the relationship between original and copy in the context of digitization of archival materials: the tentative conclusions will form the basis for a book in which the theoretical framework will be illustrated by case studies.

Project timeline

Year I

- Theoretical and methodological research on the issue of digitization of analog material;
- Organization of an interdisciplinary symposium;
- Mapping of the relevant institutions present in the region and creation of partnerships;
- L-ART/06 class on film restoration, with lab activities (60 hours / 6 CFUs).

Year II

- Creation of a protocol for documenting restoration workflows;
- Shared identification of learning goals and internships;
- L-ART/06 class on film restoration, with lab activities (60 hours / 6 CFUs).

Year III

- Database and website design;
- Analysis of learning goals' results;
- Drafting of the book;
- L-ART/06 class on film restoration, with lab activities (60 hours / 6 CFUs).

Bibliography

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