The American Moving Image Diaspora: The Archeology of US Movies in International Archives

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In February 2004 the program of the "Pelikula at Lipunan" film festival in Manila, Philippines included the premiere of the restored 35mm version of *Zamboanga*, an American independent feature film originally produced on location in Mindanao in 1936 and featuring an all Filipino cast led by Fernando Poe and Rosa Del Rosario. The story of how *Zamboanga* came to be re-discovered, preserved and publicly screened in Manila for the first time in more than 50 years is a case study that illustrates the ongoing international effort by motion picture archivists to recover, preserve and repatriate America's film heritage of the 20th century.

It is common for film archivists to think of their work as a kind of cultural archeology, especially in relation to motion pictures produced prior to the mid-20th century. Every nation has lost significant percentages of the movies produced within its borders over the past century. For American film archivists the task is particularly difficult because of the vastly greater number of commercial and non-commercial films that originated in the U.S., compared to any

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other country, and the high loss rates that American productions of all genres are known to have suffered. A study published by the Library of Congress in 1993 estimated that more than fifty percent of all American movies produced between 1893 and 1951, the so-called "nitrate era," have either been lost forever or survive only in poor quality copies.[1] And the loss rate for films of the silent era (1893-1929) is even greater with an estimated 80 percent of the total output considered completely deteriorated or destroyed. But the bad news doesn't end with the close of the nitrate era. The introduction of safety film in 1951 eliminated the disastrous fires which consumed so many nitrate collections but it did nothing to end the shrinkage, color fading, brittleness and other effects of physical deterioration that adversely affect all acetate based film materials of the modern era that are not stored in optimal environmental conditions. In fact, some films produced as late as the 1990s are already showing signs of deterioration because the original negatives, sound tracks and other production elements have not been stored in facilities with proper temperature and humidity control.

The reasons why so many American movies have been lost are complex. They include a combination of neglect by an industry ever-focused on the release of "new product," the considerable economic incentive to recycle old movies to recover the pure silver that formed an image recording layer on the film stock, and the great expense and expertise required by modern film archives to produce high quality 35mm restored versions from damaged or deteriorated original film elements. It must also be acknowledged that many films have been lost because of the cumulative neglect attributable to the bias ingrained throughout most of the last century in the majority of America's libraries, museums, universities, archives and other institutions charged with collecting culturally important materials that consigned movies to the low status of popular culture, and thus deemed undeserving of long term conservation for posterity. It's not just the Hollywood feature films that have faded away. America's film heritage always embraced a far more diverse array of production genres than those that came to be recognized as the canon of Hollywood cinema, and it is those lesser genres that have often suffered most. The losses reported by the Library of Congress in 1993 are largely concentrated among the newsreel libraries, independent

and avant garde productions, educational and industrial films, short comedies, home movies, and other orphan genres that eluded cultural recognition and the consequent protection of institutional and private collectors during the post WWII years.

And let's briefly digress to consider "home movies," a category of American filmmaking that has been long overlooked and derided as one of the lowest forms of moving image popular culture. Of course not all home movies are worth preserving in public archives; even the most diehard archivist has to draw a line short of acquiring anonymous small gauge film reels of John Q. Citizen cavorting at the beach. But this most democratic of film genres is undergoing a major reassessment in archives and some sectors of the academic community. There are many important historical events of the 20th century for which the home movies of a spectator are the only moving image record. Perhaps the most famous example is the 8mm color footage of the assassination of John F. Kennedy recorded by Abraham Zapruder in 1963. In 1994 this film was added to the National Film Registry by the Librarian of Congress to promote public awareness of the fact that home movies can have great historical significance.[2] Millions of feet of home movies of political conventions, wartime exploits, world's fairs, local community and sporting events, and other scenes of American national life exist in private hands and in some institutions waiting to be analyzed and discovered as unique public records by future generations.

Zamboanga is a case study of the circuitous route to rediscovery that many independent and studio produced films followed in order to be preserved by America's film archives. In 2000 the Finnish Film Archives contacted the Library of Congress about a 16mm print version of a 35mm five reel independent production, with Swedish subtitles, in the hands of a local collector.[3] Their research indicated that it was probably an independent American production from the 1930s. The print was repatriated and restored by enlarging it to 35mm safety film by the staff of the Library's Motion Picture Conservation Center. In the meantime, further research by the reference staff of the Library's Moving Image Section confirmed that the surviving print was, indeed, the 1936 production *Zamboanga*. However, the full significance of the film was not realized until a coincident extended research visit by Philippine filmmaker and historian

Nick Deocampo, under the auspices of a Fulbright fellowship, to the Library of Congress in 2003.[4] Zoran Sinobad, a reference librarian in the Library's Moving Image Section, who coordinated the repatriation and preservation of *Zamboanga*, pointed out to Prof. Deocampo that the film had been recently preserved asked if he would like to see it on the last day before his scheduled return to Manila. Intrigued but unaware of what it was, Deocampo realized after viewing several reels that *Zamboanga* was only the fourth film produced before WWII known to survive in any international film archive of the more than one hundred feature films produced in the Philippines since 1919. Moreover, as a testimony to the unpredictable way in which cultural artifacts from the past can connect with the present, the son of the film's leading male actor, Fernando Poe, Jr., himself a foremost Philippine film actor of the 1980s & 90s, was a leading candidate for the office of president of the Philippines in spring 2004. And so the second premiere of *Zamboanga* in Manila had an unexpected significance as the direct result of a truly international cooperative effort, beginning with a lost film discovered in Finland, preserved in the U.S. and repatriated after more than fifty years to the Philippines.[5]

The story of *Zamboanga* is not unusual. In the 1970s the distinguished historian Thomas Cripps was conducting research in the Filmoteca Española and found a citation for an unreserved 35mm nitrate print for a film titled *La Negra*, which he suspected might be the Spanish version of a long-lost film produced by Oscar Micheaux. In the 1990s the Library of Congress acquired a safety preservation negative of the film copied from the original nitrate print. Working from internal evidence in the surviving film, including single frames of original English language intertitles in several instances, and published texts by Oscar Micheaux, historian Scott Simmon produced a restored version of *Within Our Gates* for the Library of Congress, which is now recognized as a major recovery of the lost work of an important African American independent filmmaker. *Zamboanga* and *Within Our Gates* are excellent examples of how academic researchers can work together with film archivists to discover and restore films of cultural and historical importance.

Discoveries of American films in foreign countries are not limited to single films. Important large collections totaling thousands

of reels of nitrate films from the silent and early sound eras have been found and repatriated to the U.S. from the Yukon Territory of Canada in the 1970s and Australia in the 1990s. These kinds of collections always include a miscellany of discoveries and evoke a genuine sense of archeological investigation among the archivists who find them. The great majority of the film reels found in these collections are rediscoveries and virtually all have some level of importance. Each is a small time capsule that opens a short moving image window to a past time and place. This is especially true of the newsreels and short actuality films that dominated American production at the beginning of the 20th century. Even the comedies and melodramas, whose entertainment significance is passé, have much to say to cultural historians, sociologists, anthropologists and researchers in other disciplines able to look beyond the surface. One of the most interesting and unexplored elements of visual history captured in old movies are the glimpses of the architecture and other aspects of the American urban landscape that have been lost to the wrecking ball. This is not to say that cinematic gems rarely appear. Among the newsreels, parts of feature films and forgotten one reelers in the films from Australia were two long lost early short comedies starring the comedian Harold Lloyd.

The reason why so many American films are still being discovered in such distant places as the Yukon Territory, Finland and Australia has to do with the economics of the film distribution business. American motion pictures have dominated the world movie landscape since World War I. In the early part of the 20th century film prints for exhibition were generally produced in laboratories based in New York and Los Angeles and then exported worldwide through studio controlled distribution networks. Later, duplicating negatives of completed movies were sent to regional film labs in Europe and economic centers on other continents to produce prints closer to areas of regional exhibition, thereby reducing shipping costs. Once a negative or film print had run its course and was no longer in popular demand, it had little economic value. No standard policy existed among the studios or regional distributors for storage conditions, retention or disposal. Collections of these outmoded films, even movies recognized in their time as "classics," built up in warehouses around the world and became increasingly forgotten as they

were superceded by new releases. Because of the highly flammable nature of nitrate film, many such collections ended in spectacular fires, some occurring on various continents as late as the 1990s. In the majority of cases these 35mm print libraries were discarded to save storage costs, by either recycling to recover the silver bullion used in their manufacture or simply burning or discarding in landfills.

Generally speaking the older the production date for a American movie the greater are the chances that it doesn't survive in a U.S. archive. But that doesn't mean it might not exist elsewhere. The Library of Congress study cited earlier incorporated the results of a special survey of the holdings of surviving American studio productions of the 1920s reported in the collections of member institutions of the Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film (FIAF), the leading international organization of motion picture preservation archives.[6] For American films, the decades of the 1920s is considered by film archivists to be the most poorly represented in American archives by surviving materials in any film format.[7] The survey, undertaken to collect the first reliable information on American films among the holdings of major film archives in Europe and the countries of the former Soviet bloc, showed the surprising result that almost as many American films of the 1920s survived solely in archives outside the U.S. as those found in American film archives. Moreover, enough evidence was collected to indicate that many films of that decade previously considered to be lost by American archivists and scholars still survived, often in unpreserved condition, in foreign collections. The intriguing implications of this study are that many more lost American films from the teens, the 1930s and other decades may also exist in foreign archives. However, in spite of the fact that Russia and the former Soviet bloc countries have become independent and more open to researchers, few resources have gone to film archives in those countries to create modern inventories of holdings and to allow for the preservation or repatriation of surviving archival film elements to the U.S.

Movies are both tangible and intangible cultural assets. To the majority of those involved in the intellectual world of cinema as teachers, critics and historians, the importance of the artifactual nature of motion pictures is rarely appreciated or understood. Movies

have three dimensions: length, breadth and depth, in addition to a multitude of other characteristics, such as color, sound, projection speed, etc., that further define their unique physical qualities. Above all, movies in all their important component parts, e.g., negatives, sound tracks and projection prints, are fragile objects that are subject to damage, decay and the same attitudes of neglect that have caused the destruction of so many buildings, works of art, green spaces and other cultural treasures during the last century that are now generally regarded as irreplaceable.

Considering the hundreds of thousands of movies produced in America since the 1890s, it is remarkable to consider that, at the beginning of the 21st century, only four major public institutions are committed to the ongoing effort to collect and preserve this nation's theatrical motion picture heritage in its original 35mm format. They are the Library of Congress, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the UCLA Film and Television Archive in Los Angeles, and the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. The major film studios, motivated in recent years by the economic incentive of after market revenues from cable and DVD distribution, are now doing a much better job of protecting their valuable corporate assets than in the past. However, much remains to be done. The Library of Congress alone holds over 125 million feet of nitrate motion picture materials and, at the present rate of preservation, it may take decades to fully preserve and restore this collection. In the meantime the search for lost films goes on and international researchers in the field of American studies are in an excellent position, as they pursue their areas of interest in the archives and libraries of the world, to be on the lookout for the missing pieces of America's film history that remain to be discovered and preserved.

[1] *Film Preservation 1993: A Study of the Current State of American Film Preservation,* Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 1993. The highly flammable 35mm film stock used worldwide by the movie industry until the early 1950s was made from a type of flexible plastic material known as "cellulose nitrate." Its use was discontinued in the U.S. in 1950-51 and replaced by a "safety" or non-flammable based acetate film stock.

[2] In 1988 the U.S. Congress created the National Film Preservation Board under the direction of the Librarian of Congress. It also established the National Film Registry to which the Librarian has selected 25 American films per year since 1989 based on their cultural, historical and/or aesthetic importance. Nominations for the registry are accepted annually from the public and a special board of advisors representing film archivists, critics, academic organizations and the major Hollywood guilds.

[3] Antti Alanen, curator in the Finnish Film Archive, first discovered the film. Zoran Sinobad, reference librarian in the Library of Congress Moving Image Section, coordinated its repa-

triation to the U.S. The Swedish subtitles indicate that the surviving 16mm copy was obtained from the original producer, perhaps in the 1950s for distribution in Nordic countries.

[4] Nick Deocampo is director of the Mowelfund Institute, Quezon City, Philippines.

[5] A new 35mm safety print was donated by the Library of Congress to the archives of the Mowelfund Institute, Quezon City, Philippines.

[6] FIAF was established in 1938 by founding member archives from Germany, France, England and the Museum of Modern Art from the U.S. Membership now includes 120 film archives in countries around the world dedicated to the preservation of the world's film heritage.

[7] *Film Preservation 1993*, pp. 61ff.