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The Work Print

This book was born around the table of a café in Vienna, Austria on New Year's Eve 2005. The fact that the conversation ended up revolving around the topic of film curatorship shouldn't come as a surprise. For us, it wasn't talking about business: when you enjoy what you're doing in your profession, the boundaries between work and leisure can easily become blurred. It is after hours, and in good company, that ideas often start flowing, unconstrained by the imperatives of deadlines, meetings, and written reports. So there we were, having a good time and in the mood for straight talk. We were concerned about our field, frustrated by what appeared to us like a profound crisis of the so-called "archival movement", and eager to do something to get out of the impasse.

For different reasons, each of us felt that a redefinition of "curatorship" was the best way to ensure that film archives have a chance to maintain a meaningful place in society. The "uniqueness" of their collections is no longer a defining feature of their identity, and the quality of their projection prints often appears to be lower than that of more cheaply produced digital copies. Nevertheless, we use *Film* in the title of this book (instead of "moving image") because we are preoccupied with the future of cinema as a cultural entity; *Curatorship*, because we believe that

interpretation is what differentiates a collecting body from a mere repository of audiovisual content; *Digital* and *Marketplace*, because we are convinced that the two words go hand in hand, leading to a dramatic redefinition of what is termed the "moving image experience".

The implications of our choice of words are obvious. By saying *film* we refer to a specific historical phenomenon, rooted in the 20th century, with all its distinctive characteristics. However, we also imply that many of the issues facing the analog heritage – especially the challenges of preservation and public presentation – also apply to the digital world, or are bound to do so in the near future. A corollary of the title is our intention to deliberately sabotage the traditional distinction between *film archives* and *film museums*. In our view, this separation should be scrutinized, and possibly even questioned, as we believe that any organization that needs to interpret its collections to the public should be driven by some form of curatorship. Finally, the digital marketplace is the arena where access to the film heritage is recognized as the main *raison d'être* of our activity, a blunt reality to which most archival institutions have reacted with passivity – often tinged with resignation ("film is dead anyway") – or by embracing the new regime without a proper identification of

the principles and values underlying our profession.

If Vienna is the birthplace of this project, the Italian city of Pordenone is where its seed was planted. Participation in the *Giornate del Cinema Muto*, the premier international forum for the rediscovery and study of the silent film heritage, made us realize that a new audience is raising questions too often avoided by our own community – a new generation of viewers with fresh ideas, a great deal of enthusiasm, and a growing impatience towards what they perceive as hesitation, dogmatism, or a paternalistic attitude on our part. When asked why we bother insisting upon the projection of 35mm prints, when digital projection “looks better”, without scratches on the image, we don’t know how to explain persuasively the difference between the two media; on the other hand, when we argue that the digital era opens up a number of ethical issues in our domain, we are exposed to increasingly vocal allegations of arrogance or nostalgia. We’re tired of this. In the absence of a frank discussion on these topics within the organizations where we would have expected it to occur since the dawn of the Digital Age, we have decided to make the debate happen among ourselves.

We are presenting our case in the form of conversations instead of formal essays, very much in the spirit of our first meeting in Vienna. We agreed at the outset that we would not be afraid of contradicting ourselves, of disagreeing with each other, of repeating the same concepts when we felt compelled to do so. Redundancies, paradoxes, and incongruities often represent hidden intentions; as we have nothing at stake but the desire to bring dilemmas to the surface and explore their implications without

reducing them to mere technological issues, we opted for leaving our viewpoints in their rough state, even at the cost of making the reader feel at times dazed and confused. Under the current circumstances, we prefer chaos to the polite sterility of consensus, the work print to the polished final cut.

We belong to three generations of film archivists and curators. Some of us have lived in a mostly “analog” world and are now facing the challenge of the digital paradigm shift; others began their involvement with film archives and museums while the change was occurring, and are now trying to find their way in a plethora of possibilities and constraints. Then there are those for whom “digital” has been in the picture from the start, and yet are keen to understand how this brave new world will reshape the principles and questions raised by the founders of our discipline. All these voices will hopefully be heard in the following pages.

Some of the texts included in this volume are drawn or adapted from works previously published by members of our team, or written by colleagues with whom we found an intellectual affinity. Alexander Horwath’s “The Market vs. The Museum” was published in the *Journal of Film Preservation* no. 70, November 2005. Chapter 8 integrates a piece written by Kristin Thompson, “The Celestial Multiplex”, published on Kristin’s and David Bordwell’s weblog (www.davidbordwell.net/blog/?p=595) on 27 March 2007; it is reproduced here with Kristin and David’s kind permission. Paolo Cherchi Usai’s “Five Scenarios” at the end of Chapter 7 is adapted from his speech to the students of the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation at the graduation ceremony held on June 23,

2006. His “Charter of Curatorial Values” was first published in the *Journal of the National Film and Sound Archive*, vol. 1, no.1, Spring 2006; the glossary in the Appendix is reproduced (in abridged and revised form) from the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia’s *Collection Policy* (2006), pp. 55–61. Both are reprinted here with the kind permission of the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia.

Chapter 2 contains – as a prologue – an edited transcript of the initial conversation between the four authors in Vienna on December 31, 2005. All other chapters are a montage of a series of conversations – via telephone, Skype, e-mail exchanges, or in actual meetings on four continents – among the authors, with editing kept to a minimum in order to preserve the liveliness of the dialogues. These conversations took place

between 2006 and April 2008. Our thanks go to Edith Kramer and Livio Jacob for their support and advice throughout the book’s gestation. Teresa Devlin patiently transcribed most of our discussions, and encouraged us with her feedback to our initial discussions. Catherine A. Surowiec tackled the formidable task of editing and styling our avalanche of words with sensitivity, clear-sightedness, and attention to detail, miraculously transforming our exchanges into readable prose while retaining our individual voices and conversational tone. The design by Gabi Adebisi-Schuster interprets the spirit of our project better than we could have possibly hoped for. We would like to express here our gratitude to all, and happily take responsibility for any failure in conveying our thoughts in an intelligible manner.