Fundamentals of Digital Humanities: Digital Archives

Assignment

My Thoughts on: Preserving Film (on Film) in a Digital Age by Josef Lindner

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Do not go gentle into that good night,

Old age should burn and rave at close of day;

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

This astute essay by Josef Lindner talks about the importance of film archiving in general, and the importance of film archiving on celluloid films in particular. He uses very poignant examples and incidents from film making history, to show us the importance of film preservation, to show how we have lost a very significant share of our films forever. These films are important not only as pieces of historical documentation but also as forms of art, as proud examples of human creativity.

In this assignment, I would not be summarizing the essay by Josef Lindner, but will be adding my thoughts to it, what I felt after reading it.

In this post-digital world, where every possible atom of physical existence is being digitized to bytes on a memory chip, it has become an utmost necessity to reevaluate the place of celluloid films in our film industry. Amongst the chants of ‘old must make way for new’, it is of paramount significance to establish the importance of celluloid films as a distinct production medium, and not as a technology that has been replaced by digital imaging, but as a creative medium that film creators can depend upon.

Just like how a painter can choose between water-colors and oil paints, movie-makers must also be given a choice to choose between films and digital. This is a hybrid world of digital and not-digital. And same should be valid for film archivists also.

It is unquestionably crucial to preserve films for our future generations, but it is of the question of how to do these preservations. Should we go with the celluloids, for whom, as Lindner pointed out, there are established consensus and methods, or with the newly introduced digital technology? Yes, the celluloids may prove to be rather problematic and burdensome, but the digital format also, which though may look quite promising, is not without its flaws. It should always be considered that the hard drives, used in the storage of digital formats, is quite unreliable; they get corrupted easily and have a rather short life span to be considered for an archiving tool. Also, celluloid films themselves are associated with the very history of the film. It is impossible to neglect their conservation, while we talk about the film’s preservation. And in a very strict sense, digitization cannot be equated with preservation.

In the name of moving forward, film creators are being forced to use the digital medium. Film tapes are being phased out step by step. Now, with the success of online streaming services like Netflix, it has become even more difficult for celluloids to survive. Film archivists, too, are being asked to move towards the digital media. What initially was offered as an alternative, has now become the norm.

It is necessary to understand that similar to how we cannot store the material which is ‘born digital’ on a traditional reel of film, it is also impossible to preserve films by creators who had played and experimented with the tapes of the film itself. It is impossible to preserve the aesthetics that the creator has placed into that strip of film by simply converting it into a file on a PC.

It is aptly said to ‘never borrow sorrow from tomorrow’, but to give our best in the present. What we can do is to preserve this art of celluloid films in the process of preserving the films. In the face of all this bleakness, what we can do is to fight, fight for the capturing of light on the negatives. What we can do is to express our rage, rage against the dying of the light.