

Appraising Moving Images: Assessing the Archival and Monetary Value of Film and Video Resources

By Sam Kula

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NOTE

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Sam Kula, renowned film archivist, opens *Appraising Moving Images: Assessing the Archival and Monetary Value of Film and Video Records* with a provocative statement: “In archives, the only thing that really matters is the quality of the collections; all the rest is housekeeping” (p. [1]). It is true that many archivists aspire to positions in collection development. In the archival literature, appraisal is a hot topic (p. [23]). However, appraisal of motion pictures is a much newer area, appearing infrequently in the literature (p. 4). Moving image (MI) records present unique appraisal challenges. Kula calls on MI repositories to develop and refine their appraisal and selection policies, and/or to create them (p. 2). The author’s goals are to describe a group of principles to steer archivists as they develop policies at their institutions and to explain and analyze appraisal policies at archives throughout the world (p. 6). Kula also dedicates a chapter to monetary appraisal, which is especially relevant to archivists who work in countries where tax laws allow donors of documentation to benefit significantly.

Appraisal—the act of attributing value to archival material—is an important activity distinguishable from selection and acquisition (p. [23]). Selection can be described as the act of decision-making and triage based on appraisal policy (pp. 5, 27). Selection is an obvious need when a repository is unable to collect everything of archival value. For example, a single archive attempting to capture a nation’s output of moving images would quickly discover financial barriers to universal retention (p. 61).

For archives with no guidance on appraisal and selection, “... the collection will simply grow, by chance, opportunity, or accident, without any reference to the universe of images available” (p. [59]). While advocating the need for a policy, Kula encourages archivists to align appraisal with their institution’s mission. Kula’s writing turns theoretical at times, which may frustrate the novice. Still, *Appraising Moving Images* deserves attention from archivists at all stages in their careers, including newcomers to the profession.

Chapter 1 explores the evolving relationship between moving images and archives from the invention of cinematography to the present day. Kula’s discussion of two pioneers in motion picture archives—Henri Langlois (Cinémathèques Françaises, Paris) and Ernest Lindgren (National Film Library, London)—may stand out as the most memorable and instructive part of the chapter, and indeed, as a highlight of the book.

Langlois and Lindgren were contemporaries, beginning their tenures in the mid-1930s. Regarding appraisal, Langlois claimed that no archivist has the right to play God; therefore, a film archive should strive for universal inclusion, as all films deserve protection in an archival repository. While this position is admirable and may have even served a motivating purpose in the chaos that enveloped post-war Europe, it is difficult to

maintain in practice (p. 2). With the growth in production and the lack of mandatory deposit legislation in most countries, motion picture archives continue to face what Langlois discovered but may not have admitted: one cannot collect everything, and when relying on voluntary deposit, choices must be made so that the archivist knows what to solicit actively. Despite Langlois' best intentions to collect everything, in reality he focused on the feature film. (This is not necessarily a wrong decision; it remains a current collecting practice for certain archives.) And while Langlois maintained an international scope, he managed to ignore large segments of French production, which to this day are housed outside of the Cinémathèques Françaises in the Cinémathèque de Toulouse. Langlois was a visionary and a leader; indeed he is the only archivist ever to win an Oscar®.

Lindgren—more cautious than Langlois—lobbied for a system of mandatory deposit, similar to the British Library system. However, the legislation never passed, and Lindgren turned to other solicitation methods. Today, archival administrators continue to debate the respective merits of voluntary versus mandatory deposit. Mandatory deposit does work in some settings. For example, television network archives typically have institutional backing to set guidelines for transfer to archives from production. For television networks, archival holdings are seen as “assets,” since they have financial value for potential re-broadcast. However, selection is still necessary, since no archive keeps every moment of every broadcast (14-15, 19).

In Chapter 2, “Appraisal Theory,” Kula examines the concepts of “appraisal” and “selection.” He references classic archivists such as T.R. Schellenberg and Hilary Jenkinson. Kula also cites publications on MI appraisal, specifically the *Recommendation for the Safeguarding and Preservation of Moving Images*, which was adopted by the UNESCO General Assembly in 1980 and *The Archival Appraisal of Moving Images: A RAMP Study with Guidelines* (1983). Kula chaired the UNESCO meeting that compiled the *Recommendation*, and he authored the *RAMP Study*. He also established the National Film and Television Archives of Canada and directed it for many years, and he remains a special consultant on audiovisual archiving for Canada. He wrote “Appendix D”—a history of film archiving—for the Canadian publication *Fading Away: Strategic Options to Ensure the Protection of and Access to Our Audio-Visual Memory* (1995). A systematic literature review of Kula's own works would have been welcome, in addition to his discussion of archivists such as Schellenberg and Jenkinson. Kula does provide a brief overview to his published work in the introduction, and he includes a welcome and thorough discussion of the *Recommendation* in Chapter 4.

It may be tempting to skip Chapter 3, “Form and Function of Moving Images,” and move on to the nuts and bolts in Chapter 4. That would be a mistake, because this 5-page chapter provides Kula's interpretations of key principles that should guide the formulation of appraisal policy. Archives have a long tradition of creating their own standards for selection. Kula presents and defines certain concepts that MI archivists need to consider as they evaluate MI records for acquisition and preservation. The message from Chapter 3 is that all moving images can be characterized by form, function, and provenance. Kula describes how these concepts have different meanings for MI records than they do for paper records and why it is instructive to interpret every potential acquisition according to these criteria.

With a clearer understanding of the need for archival appraisal, the reader can appreciate the practical guidelines in Chapters 4-6. Chapter 4 offers examples of appraisal policies as well as descriptions of how they affect archival practice. This chapter is especially useful for those archives officially charged with safeguarding a nation's production. These archives may be private, public, or a coordinated network of various types of archives. For example, in Germany, much of the physical custody of the country's film heritage is in the Bundesarchiv, or national archives, but the acquisition policies of three major film archives are coordinated to avoid duplication and to ensure that as many productions as possible are appraised and preserved (p. 81). In the United States, many archives working as a network acquire U.S. motion pictures. This network includes the National Archives, other government agencies, and private, non-profit organizations (p. 70).

In Chapter 5, Kula expands on the importance of additional documentation, a topic also mentioned in Chapter 3. Archives should try to obtain accompanying textual documentation along with MI records. Examples of related documentation are stills, scripts, and production files. Related documentation is a useful resource for researchers while enhancing the value of the acquisition for the archive (p. [52]).

The book closes with a chapter on monetary appraisal. The reputation of an archivist depends on his/her understanding of both archival and monetary appraisal. Armed with this knowledge, an archivist has a better chance of avoiding pitfalls of unfairness or incompetence (pp. [1]-2). Furthermore, sound appraisal policy allows archivists to go beyond simply avoiding problems. It provides the groundwork for building superior collections that serve researchers and reflect institutional missions.

Appraising Moving Images is valuable for archivists engaged in collection development. Creating appraisal policy is challenging but worthwhile, especially for archives that belong to cooperative networks. Henri Langlois' vision of universal preservation remains a dream for all who cherish moving images as historical and cultural artifacts. In the meantime, MI archivists can lead the way by creating innovative and efficient appraisal and selection policies and procedures, and sharing their experiences with others in the profession.