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Film archives: a decaying visual history

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The Communication Revolution and modern life

The 20th century saw a movement from the Industrial Revolution to what we could call the Communication Revolution, and perhaps a newer revolution in the past 20 years, which we could characterise as the Information Revolution.

The Communication Revolution began with the discovery of photography (and shortly thereafter cinema) at the end of the 19th century. The Lumière brothers in France, Edward Muybridge in England and Thomas Edison in America all explored the possibilities of moving and still images. Rapid expansion of technology and opportunity saw the rise of revolutionary cinema in Russia and the emergence of Hollywood, the beginnings of an industry that today engulfs our world with images.

The ability of a flickering image in a darkened room to quickly capture the imaginations of people led to the rise of cinema. Beginning as a representational medium that replaced painting, it rapidly evolved into an entertainment, with its image capture, reproduction and dissemination in a way unimaginable even 25 years ago.

Modern life would be incomprehensible without photography, video and cinema, all of which can now be accessed, produced, controlled and propagated by anyone with access to the Internet. Our world has changed forever and, importantly, the way we see it. The creation of images used to be the domain of a small group of experts; now probably nearly half of the world's population make their own images.

The development of computers during the early and mid-20th century began to change the way information was stored, processed and distributed. As computers became more powerful, people began to use them more and more for image capture and manipulation. The "analogue" or non-digital way of doing things had to be translated into "digital formats" which led to a rapid surge in technological changes to speed this process. Editing moved from physically cutting strips of film and glueing them together to a non-linear process, an electronic cut-and-paste scenario.

The video camera has developed from a primitive machine into a very sophisticated piece of electronic wizardry that today challenges the century-old dominance of 35mm film as the acquisition medium of choice. The rapid leaps video has made in

the past 20 years alone probably surpass all the technological advances in film and image production during the past century. Truly, we have put the world into a box.

Today video is ubiquitous, from home security surveillance to scientific study, from CNN to home videos on YouTube, from traffic and military satellite pictures to snaps of our children and pets, and it is proliferating rapidly. We never know who is recording the world we are in at any given moment, with what purpose, what technology and, importantly for this conference, if and how it will be preserved. What is worthy of preservation? Who will decide that? How will the money be found to preserve it? In what form will it be preserved?

Images are power. Images are knowledge. Images have value. When Africans give away their own images to foreign entities, we sell our intellectual property, we give up our cultural heritage to those who understand and seek to gain the power of imagery. We allow others to seize our images and fashion them in their own way, a form of colonialism and exploitation that our libraries and archives must resist.

Value, cost and access

How does one define the "value" of an image, and how do we define its "legitimacy"? Which gatekeeper will decide which images are "worthy" of preservation and which are to be destroyed? What role does technology play in image creation? It is not neutral. What is a "private" image? What is a "public" image? What distinguishes a "professional" image from a "consumer" image, and does this confer any special extra value on it, and if so, how? These are tricky questions for all us.

For instance, compare the value of the images of "professional" news-gatherers who were "embedded" with US forces in the invasion of Iraq, with the "private" images recorded by some US soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners in Abu Graib. Which has more public interest value? Which is more "truthful"? Which should be preserved: the professional news broadcasts or the frontline truth of what was really happening? We need to interrogate these concepts of value and define our policies towards them.

It is said 35mm film is the best archive source because it lasts so long and can be transferred to any format and medium. This may be true, but it is also a fiction. One only has to look at preservation in the major Hollywood studios to see that many old films, some only 50 years old, are deteriorating badly. They are spending millions to restore many Hollywood classics, then selling them as DVDs. They use computer software not available even five years ago to remove scratches, imperfections and dirt, restoring the films to a pristine condition. But what of Africa's images?

We know 35mm was the acquisition medium for more than half of the 20th century. So nearly all the historical footage from this time is on 35mm film. But working in 35mm is very, very expensive. The cost of a 400 foot roll of 35mm film is more than

US$250. This lasts just over four minutes in the camera. Then it has to be processed, at about the same cost, and printed, again at about the same cost. Or it can be transferred to the digital domain, again at about the same cost. So to acquire very good images using 35mm film will cost in the region of $250 per minute, excluding the hire of the camera, lenses, personnel and other equipment. On entry-level High Definition video, it will cost you around $25 for an hour's worth of imagery.

A major archive company which specialises in the sale of World War II stock footage is Pathé. Their website lists 3-minute clips going for £149 (about $236) for internal use in a single country for only five years. Imagine if you wanted world-wide rights in all media for perpetuity! It would be prohibitive. Certainly it is completely unaffordable and inaccessible for developing countries. Another example: filmmakers can avoid using Pathé's expensive World War II footage by using similar material accessed through the US Library of Congress at virtually no cost. This raises the question: should archives be commercial or publicly owned, and what would be the ownership criteria?

Access to our own material is also often denied. Another example: a BBC crew came to South Africa and filmed a lot of material around the origins of humankind. They now own it. When a South African filmmaker, on a much lower budget, wanted to use some of this material, the cost of archive was prohibitive. In Africa we often cannot afford to make archive material of our own heritage and filmmakers often complain that our stories are being "stolen" by rich companies from the developed world.

Yet there is nothing to prevent filmmakers coming into African countries with cameras and making any sort of images, and taking them back and using them in any way they like. There are no work permits, no policies, no enforcement and so no compliance.

A hidden history

A different example, this time from South Africa, reveals another problem. During the fight against apartheid, a number of filmmakers documented police actions in the townships and the struggle against racism. When South Africa became the last country in Africa to be liberated, in 1994, the Mayibuye Robben Island Museum took in this archive for safe keeping. Nearly the entire archive had been shot on the now-obsolete U-Matic video format, and U-matic tape players are hard to come by. This footage is now deteriorating very, very badly. The oxide is coming off the magnetic tapes, clogging the heads, and destroying the images. It is difficult to raise funds to clean and transfer this material to a new, current format and thus ensure its survival.

Another example: when I was filming in Mali three years ago, our point of contact was the Mali Cinematography Institute in Bamako. While we were there, we were shown Mali's film archive. It was a very large unprotected room under a tin roof, with dusty film negative and prints stacked haphazardly in piles taller than a person.

There was no catalogue (only some older projectionists knew the archive), no digital copies, no back-ups and no archival protection against film's enemies: dust, humidity, damp, light and heat. So a large part of West and Central Africa's visual history of the early to mid-20th century has never been seen, except by a few people. How many other countries have archives in a similarly parlous state? What if there was a fire or a flood?

If Africa is ever to tell her own stories, these images have to be liberated from their archives, brought out into the digital domain, and put onto the internet, where they can be marketed, sold, seen, and appreciated for the powerful stories they can tell.

Every visual archive format has deterioration problems, which are more pronounced than paper. If paper deteriorates, it can be copied, photographed, scanned. If a visual image deteriorates, it is gone forever. The Betacam SP format, which replaced the obsolete U-matic video format, was the standard for more than 15 years, but now it too is being phased out. As technology races ahead, formats come and go like so many summer showers. Betacam, Hi-8, DV, DVCam, XDCam –all have been overtaken by High Definition formats, and many of those will be gone within five years. Where is this technological race going, and how is one to control it?

Going digital

Put it on computer, says someone, make it all digital. But does anyone remember MS-DOS? Those old dinosaurs we used to call computers? My first computer was an Apple Mac Classic, the first computer in the world to have 1 MB of RAM built in! Today my laptop, a fraction of the size of that computer, has 4 GB of RAM, and it is already out of date! So the technology race is a headache for archivists, because it requires updates of the entire visual archive about every 10-15 years, an expensive and time-consuming undertaking. But there are positive aspects to digitisation.

It becomes searchable, accessible and more manageable, and thus more capable of providing a revenue stream, provided that the technology and the software are constantly updated. The downside is that fallible humans create the search parameters, access codes and management of the archive. Poor organisational ability, lack of capacity, outdated software or ignorance can lead to gaps and omissions, or worse, historical bias.

A second positive is the space issue. Vault space is constantly diminishing (some would say in inverse proportion to the amount of valuable material needing to be stored). A library of 1000 U-matic tapes would probably take up a wall of space, a library of the same material on a digital DVCam tape-based format would probably take up a shelf or two, and the same material in the digital domain, would probably take up the space of a handful of Terabyte removable hard drives.

I know from personal searches of archives that the "good" material could probably be cut down to a couple of hours from, say, a hundred hours. Does one want to

keep the wobbly, out of focus, overexposed bits? Do they tell part of the story? I am a filmmaker with more than 25 years' experience, but am I qualified to judge what should go and what should stay? I doubt it! During the 9/11 bombings, a huge amount of "amateur" footage made it onto professional news broadcasts and flashed around the world. These images were as memorable as those of the shooting of JF Kennedy (also amateur footage) or the landing of man on the moon (shot by scientists).

Governments have no central repository for this sort of "private" archive, and it grows daily. Private bequests create problems for museums, archives and universities, all of which have space problems, budget problems and suitability problems. But who decides, and who will know, whether acceptance or refusal will see preservation of a priceless archive of "amateur" visual material of incredible social or historical significance, or whether it should land up in the trash? Irish television took their historical archives and asked the public to send in theirs, leading to a fascinating series which was based entirely on archive footage and gave an amazing feel for the times of yesteryear. It cost next to nothing, yet became a priceless heritage treasure. Archaeologists can piece together incredible stories of our ancient past from the most mundane of artefacts. Imagine what they could do if they had our pictures!

The scenario I've painted is bleak and depressing. So what do we need to do?

A call to action

We need a pan-African initiative to do an audit across Africa of all audio-visual materials. This strategic initiative must be co-ordinated at the highest levels, such as the AU, and locally at ministerial level. We need to establish where all the archives are, their condition, importance, provenance, and the cost of preserving them and migrating them to digital formats. The most critical archives need the first attention.

We must roll out a massive education campaign across the continent, from policy makers and captains of industry to archivists, filmmakers and audiences. Without political will, history will be rewritten and much of it will be lost in the process.

Political will is needed to provide the funding, which must be sought and made available, both locally within each country and externally. This is not aid, this is a move towards self-sustainability, towards understanding our history and colonial legacies, so that we can build nations that rise above the begging-bowl images so much associated with Africa.

Archivists need further education about camera and editing techniques and technology, so that they become more proficient in evaluating imagery and their importance. What may not look important today may be vital in 20 years' time. Every upgrade of technology and every move to a new format also inadvertently contribute to a massive censorship of images that suddenly cannot be seen because technology

is obsolete and financing cannot be found to upgrade to a new format. There are many archives today across Africa in this position. Africans cannot see their own images.

Workshops need to be held around the structure and costing, funding and maintenance of digital archives. Knowledge needs to be passed on. Each archive researcher who retires takes with them irretrievable knowledge about where certain images are.

Archivists need to be trained to evaluate new archive material containing images, and how to make them accessible in the formats required by modern researchers.

The arrival of several undersea cables in Africa will hasten the move towards internet connectivity, especially ADSL, which is important for imagery. In the West many films are already edited in many different locations connected by secure internet "pipelines" that allow people to work on the images simultaneously from different continents. In the same way that cellphones have revolutionised rural communications across Africa, the Internet can change and improve the lives of Africans in many different ways. Convergence is making it all so much easier, especially for images.

We need to revise our laws of copyright to reflect current trends and developments in intellectual property law, asserting our rights and taking back our heritage. We need to lobby our governments to hasten the changes that will protect our images, and thus our self-perception, our confidence, our state as African nations. We need to educate our educators so that our children are trained on computers and cameras.

Probably the most important thing we need to do, is to act *together*. We need to cross the false boundaries of language, because images have no language, they are universal. We need to pool resources, share knowledge freely and help each other to develop sustainable strategies for knowledge and image development and preservation.

And we need to act *now*. Already Martin Scorsese has formed partnerships to promote and exhibit a slate of restored films from the developing world. But the organisations that are doing all this are American. This is a two-edged sword: while we need all the help we can get, and all the funds we can get, it does not come for free and the decision-makers are not African. This is not an isolated example, and Africa will need to move swiftly if we are not to be re-colonised via media.

African images have influenced the entire world. Many of the manuscripts of Timbuktu existed before there were European universities; African mask images influenced Man Ray and Picasso, amongst others; and our wildlife forms the core business of many major television channels such as Discovery and Animal Planet.

If we are to turn around our image of a corrupt, starving, war-torn and helpless Africa into one of a fresh, developing and creative continent full of talent and surprises, the place to begin is with our images, the knowledge of our history, and the technical know-how to bring it all to the world.

Footnote:

This paper was presented at the 1st International Conference on African Digital Libraries and Archives (ICADLA-1), held from 1 to 3 July 2009 at the United Nations Conference Centre (UNCC), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Following the paper, a call was made for delegates to facilitate the initiation of an audit in their own country, and the formation of a new organization to coordinate this was mooted (the Audio Visual Audit for Africa or AVAFA). Nineteen delegates from seven countries put their names down. Anyone wishing to get involved should contact the organizer, David Forbes, at david@shadowfilms.co.za or +27824508003.

David Forbes is an independent producer, director and award-winning cinematographer from South Africa. He has been making images for more than 30 years and has worked in more than 30 countries (21 of them African) for most of the world's major broadcasters and some of the world's biggest companies. He is currently completing a feature-length documentary on resistance to apartheid and assassinations.