An introduction to the interviews

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An Introduction to the Interviews

ABSTRACT This article explores the work that female archivists undertake today. It is based upon a series of six interviews—conducted largely in Europe in 2015—with noted female archivists, curators, and programmers. Through conversations with Bryony Dixon (British Film Institute), Giovanna Fossati (EYE Film Institute, Amsterdam), Karola Gramann (Kinothek Asta Nielsen, Frankfurt), Mariann Lewinsky (Il Cinema Ritrovato, Bologna), Elif Rongen-Kaynakçı (EYE Film Institute, Amsterdam), and Meg Labrum (National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra), it argues that women have a disproportionate impact upon the programming of silent film at festivals. It also suggests that there is a growing public that is attracted to festivals such as Il Cinema Ritrovato precisely because these festivals give us access to a vision of film history and feminism that we cannot find in traditional history books. Finally, it asks how these women work and, specifically, how the change to digital has impacted archival outreach and access today.

KEYWORDS archivists, early cinema, film archives, interviews

The interviews I undertook for this section of the journal were conducted over the course of roughly six months, between January and July 2015. During this period, I traveled to European archives—in Amsterdam, Bologna, Frankfurt, and London—to hold conversations with Bryony Dixon (British Film Institute National Archive), Giovanna Fossati (EYE Film Institute, Amsterdam), Karola Gramann (Kinothek Asta Nielsen, Frankfurt), Mariann Lewinsky (Il Cinema Ritrovato, Bologna), and Elif Rongen-Kaynakçı (EYE Film Institute, Amsterdam). I also interviewed Meg Labrum (National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra) in Melbourne. All these archivists are women who have established themselves as experts in their field. Alongside other duties, they identify, restore, curate, and program silent film. They find lost and overlooked material. They facilitate public access to this material in engaging and intelligent ways. Indeed, many of these archivists are known for their contributions to feminist programming of silent cinema at forums such as Le Giornate del Cinema Muto in Pordenone and Il Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna. The programs that they organize attract international audiences of archivists, cinephiles, scholars, researchers, and students.
Although they are certainly not alone in the work they undertake, their research, restoration, and programming are vital to our ongoing awareness of the variety and richness of early film.

Early film is a particular field of research, and the issues it raises are specific. Scholars working with music or theater archives, for example, have different experiences of the archive. It is startling to realize, perhaps, that we need to learn to use a Moviola or Steenbeck in order to see materials (if indeed a safety or viewing print exists). We also need archivists to help us find and identify films that might not be listed in extant catalogues. Furthermore, an Australian film historian such as myself, with a specialization in early films from continental Europe, must work a long way from many important film archives. I am therefore dependent on online resources as well as on the generosity and collegiality of film archivists. Indeed, my experience of film archivists has made me realize that they dedicate hours to research questions that demand specialist knowledge of film, film history, and international archival collections. The fact that they answer questions about directors, actors, and events that are spread across analogue and digital film means that they have dedicated years—if not decades—to scouring archives and viewing silent film. Their incredible visual memories are the resource we fall back on when we cannot find our way—when we cannot find a film, cannot identify a film, or are unsure of who or what we are watching onscreen.

Archivists not only help researchers into early film; they also put us in contact with the people who can digitize and transfer files, copy films to DVD, or make films available through online links created for individual research access. Digital media, therefore, makes film history newly available. For all that it enables, however—and it has indeed transformed how we research and write about film history—the files that we are sent do not allow us to see a film projected in a cinema, and often they are indeed silent. We need to go to festivals such as Le Giornate del Cinema Muto and Il Cinema Ritrovato to see films accompanied by professional musicians who know how to play the silent screen. The archivists I interviewed are uniquely significant precisely because they program these films, ensuring that a film’s temporal, spatial, and emotional scale is respected or at least suggested. Moreover, it is often the very constitution of their film programs that alerts us to new and provocative ways we might think of early film. These women—and Mariann Lewinsky is particularly pioneering in this capacity—juxtapose shorts with feature-length films, set actualities alongside fictional dramas, expose little-known or unknown actresses alongside famous celebrities, and challenge traditional canons and historical presumptions. They ensure
that variety remains the defining feature of women’s involvement with film. While archivists are not alone in programming for film festivals, they champion a participatory public, advocating for audience engagement in early film.²

My decision to curate this section grew from a simple desire to hear archivists speak. I wanted to hear what they had to say about their advocacy for audiences of early film. I wanted to know about their backgrounds, their current interests, and their forthcoming projects. Above all, I was interested in hearing how they negotiate digital as compared to analogue materials. Do these archivists conduct most of their work online? What is their relationship to analogue as compared to digital film? How has the proliferation and application of digital media changed their work? Each woman I interviewed was able to bring years of experience to her answers. They all had the maturity—as well as the archival training—to reflect upon their current practice as well as to comment on changes they had seen in workplace procedures, practices, and attitudes over the past two decades.

As a film historian, I chose (as I noted earlier) to interview women who work with silent film. Although media archives include and involve far more than women who work with early film, I believe that women have a disproportionate impact on the programming of silent film at festivals. I also believe—and this belief is drawn from my own observation as an audience member—that there is a growing public that is attracted to festivals such as Il Cinema Ritrovato precisely because these festivals give us access to a vision of film history and feminism that we cannot find in traditional history books. Indeed, I go to the festivals precisely because women such as Dixon, Lewinsky, and Rongen-Kaynakçi program sections that cannot be accessed online or on DVD, and precisely because I know that these will be intelligent and intelligible interventions into film history. In many respects, the programs that these female archivists bring to audiences are unique events. They provide evidence that forces me to rethink film’s relationship to the other arts, to history, and to any manner of categories and things. Consequently, I wanted to know where digital media and feminism sat in the lives of the women who determine much of what I see at silent film festivals.

It must be recognized, however, that this alternate glimpse of film history—in which women engage in film at every point of its production—is enabled within the context of festivals that have no feminist aim or agenda. Indeed, Le Giornate del Cinema Muto and Il Cinema Ritrovato were founded and are directed by men, spark restoration projects that focus on male directors, feature workshops and collegiums initiated and run by male colleagues, and (with a
couple of exceptions, in particular with the now-famous Maud Nelissen) employ musicians who are all men. Given this situation, how did these festivals become platforms for female archivists?

As the interviews make clear, it is the work of female archivists not only to find and restore film, but also to find and restore audiences for early film. The more that we realize that early film is varied and experimental, the more we can celebrate the range of experiences it makes available to us. In this context, a feminist archivist does not only show us marching suffragettes; she is the guarantee that evidence will be provided that will allow us to engage with the past differently. We cannot take this for granted. For example, the huge D. W. Griffith retrospective undertaken by Le Giornate del Cinema Muto between 1996 and 2008, at which over six hundred Griffith films were screened and written about by an international group of thirty-five specialists in silent film, certainly allowed us to see Griffith anew. At the same time, however, it reconfirmed the centrality of this American male director in the canon of international silent film. To my knowledge, a similarly large and famous group of scholars and archivists has not joined with a publishing house and a major international film festival to explore the oeuvre of a female director or maker. Alice Guy Blaché, Lois Weber, Germaine Dulac, and Asta Nielsen—or any other pivotal female in film history—have been celebrated in festivals but are never afforded the systemic resources offered to men.

Against the enormity of the “Projects” that confirm the importance of men in film history (the Griffith Project, the Keaton Project, the Chaplin Project, and so on) stands the work of the archivists interviewed here. What strikes me is how cognizant they are of gender imbalance, yet how collegial they nevertheless remain. Everyone speaks of community, of support, of dialogue and conversation. There is no “them” versus “us,” no outrage at women’s historic elision, and no anger at male colleagues. Instead there is a resigned awareness that male colleagues might be feminists but will not undertake feminist work. There is also ongoing reference to a network of female archivists. As you will see, Rongen-Kaynakçı speaks of Dixon and Lewinsky, who speak of Rongen-Kaynakçı and Dixon, and so on. Moreover, no one speaks of early as opposed to silent film, of modernity versus postmodernity, of media as opposed to intermediality, or of nationalism as opposed to transnationalism. Instead, questions about film history and digital archives are framed in pragmatic terms that focus on the use, function, and availability of materials—whether these be film, posters, diaries, and so on—to scholars and the public more generally. Further, each makes clear that the digital domain not only offers solutions, but also poses problems.
Importantly, feminism is discussed in a matter-of-fact way. Of course women were on film, made film, watched film, and were central to its development. Of course they have been ignored and/or elided. Archivists today preserve and digitize media holdings, and they do this cognizant of the first wave of feminists, who brought their very presence into play.

I did not send anyone a list of questions before I interviewed her; nor was I asked to do so. I wanted our conversations to be spontaneous and, as far as possible, led by individual thoughts and observations. All that each woman knew before we started to talk was that I was coediting this issue of *Feminist Media Histories* and that my topic was “archives.” I found it enormously encouraging that everyone was available to talk to me, often at short notice, and that after each interview—when I had sent the interviewees completed transcripts for review—they all had comments and corrections. Our conversations, therefore, are presented in the spirit in which they were undertaken: as an effort to include archival voices and views in an academic journal about feminism, media, and history.

Interestingly, you will see that, just as there is a genuine difference in how these women view digital film and position themselves within media institutions, there is a difference in how we might interpret the category of “the archivist.” Karola Gramann, for example, largely researches, programs, and presents feminist film, asking archives for materials and prodding for possible restoration projects. Lewinsky not only programs films for festivals, but has also begun to make DVD compilations about overlooked subjects, arguing that this is a way to present and preserve film that audiences might not otherwise see. This year, Lewinsky released a film that traces the life of overlooked nineteenth-century photographer and traveler Ella Maillart (*Ella Maillart: Double Journey*; 2015). Fossati is chief curator at EYE and directs policy, intervening in the direction that research, preservation, and public outreach will take. Meg Labrum’s role is now that of general manager. Dixon and Rongen-Kaynakçi, identified as silent film curators, make it abundantly clear that a film curator does not only order and present work to a public, but also discovers, preserves, and interprets what we see on film. In this sense, the work of the female archivist emerges in an expanded field. They are managers, bureaucrats, historians, researchers, preservationists, programmers, curators, authors, and public speakers.

I expect that the wide and varied programs these archivists curate reach audiences as variegated and engaged as themselves. I expect that film history has already been rewritten through the programs these women curate in ways we do not yet appreciate or really understand. My focus, therefore, is not on archivists’
voices in debates on digital media or on feminism in contemporary academia. Instead I listen to what these women have to say: that feminism is a cache of interrelated conversations and media practices that some of us continue to program into place.

NOTES

1. Moviolas are U.S.-made (since 1924) and Steenbecks are Dutch-made (since 1953) film-viewing and editing tables used in film archives and film restoration facilities, and they enable researchers to view nonprojected film and identify individual frames.


3. Le Giornate del Cinema Muto was founded in 1982 by Paolo Cherchi Usai, Lorenzo Codelli, Piero Colussi, Andrea Crozzoli, Luciano De Giusti, Livio Jacob, Carlo Montanaro, Piera Patat, Mario Quargnolo, and Davide Turconi. Its current president is Livio Jacob. Director David Robinson was recently replaced (in October 2015) by Jay Weissberg. Il Cinema Ritrovato was founded in 1986 by the Commune of Bologna. Its current president is Marco Bellocchio; the members of the board of directors are Alina Marazzi and Valerio De Paolis; the director is Gian Luca Farinelli; and the festival coordinator is Guy Borlée.


5. See also, for example, the Chaplin Project, undertaken by Cinema Ritrovato (http://festival.ilcinemaritrovato.it/en/sezione/progetto-chaplin/), as well as its Keaton Project (http://festival.ilcinemaritrovato.it/en/sezione/progetto-keaton/).