Showing and Telling

Film heritage institutes and their performance of public accountability

Nico de Klerk
With an introduction by Professor William Uricchio, MIT

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Introduction

Writing in the decade after the Second World War, French film critic and theorist Andre Bazin famously asked *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* It's something that people seriously concerned with film have been asking ever since. A broad question, it has taken stylistic, technological, industrial, historical, ontological, and epistemological turns in the hands of various thinkers. An urgent question, particularly at a moment when the photographic image and its celluloid base have given way to bits and bytes across a spectrum of media forms, it has reactivated interest in media specificity. A concretely situated question, it is enmeshed with Bazin's context at a moment of cultural redefinition in postwar France. That context included particular institutions (the Cinémathèque française, *Cahiers du Cinéma*), new circuits of film distribution (including a wave of US productions), and distinctly French dynamics (the cultural battles played out by the nation's political factions).

All of these–and myriad other framings–offer potentially productive ways to answer the question 'what is cinema?'. But they respond to completely different assumptions, and thus yield radically different insights. Context matters if we want to have any hope of untangling an utterance's many possible meanings. And it is essential if we want to share knowledge, to communicate. Context helps to elucidate the conditions for a text's existence, helps to make clear how it wound up in our hands, and if and why we should take it seriously. It offers vantage points, provides specificity, links the textual world to the experiential world, and gives a sense of implication and impact. And this is as true for Bazin's question as it is for the cultural artifact that ultimately provoked it: film.

Of course, we can shoot from the hip, making whatever spontaneous sense we can of a question or a cultural artifact, and offering up whatever insights come to mind. But sorting things out on the fly does not necessarily lead to knowledge, at least the kind of knowledge that we can share and build meanings upon. In fact, associations, however subjective and free-form they might seem, are themselves always already situated and encrusted with prior experience. That experience may not be articulate or systematic and may not even be shareable, but neither is it

raw and untainted. Rather, it is mute. Free-form interpretation is an oxymoron, to echo Lisa Gitelman's description of raw data.[1] And although a commitment to carefully delineated context occasionally gets dismissed as dogmatically historicist, in fact it makes visible–and better, makes conscious use of–the framing strategies implicit in an any sense-making activity, even the most associational. The difference between the contextually grounded and the free-form associational boils down to the visibility of the meaning-making process. The more explicit the references and process, the more we can share, learn, and evaluate. Context, in other words, is a constant … but it is not always visible or acknowledged.

In your hands is an eloquent, empirically grounded, and impassioned case for why context matters, what forms context can take, and ultimately, why heritage institutions have a cultural responsibility to make context publically available. Nico de Klerk's analysis of film heritage institutes (or what are commonly referred to as film archives, cinematheques, and film museums) offers an insider's look at the state of things together with a deeply informed set of cases that demonstrate both what is possible and why it matters. At the end of the day, culture, and in this case, film culture, binds us together. Culture deepens our relationships by providing a common history, informs our stance in the world by developing shared vantage points and values, and celebrates our plurality by giving us common sites for discussion and debate. Culture, to the extent that it is accessible and shared, is enabled by context. Indeed, one might go so far as to argue that culture *is* shared context.

De Klerk's case for film heritage institutes is a particularly timely one considering the ongoing and fundamental changes in the very ontology of the film medium (digitization), the transformed political climate inhabited by most western heritage institutions (neo-liberalism), and the distinctive media experiences and expectations of today's young audiences (including mobile, participatory, and on-demand access). Each of these developments has altered 'business as usual' regarding established work flows, resources, and institutional remits. Each has helped to disrupt established strategies for generating and affixing context to cultural artifacts. And as a result, each has challenged fundamentally the status of cultural legacy. Galleries, libraries, archives, and museums – not to mention universities– have all felt the impact of these changes. But

[1] Lisa Gitelman, *'Raw Data' is an Oxymoron* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).

film heritage institutions offer a singularly vivid case for exploration, with particularly pointed insights of relevance for the entire cultural sector.

Digitization, while framed as a panacea for problems such as creation, storage, and access, has in fact proved to be something of a mixed blessing. Yes, digitization has broken distribution bottlenecks, routinized accessibility, and supported a widespread participatory culture; but it has also produced challenges. In the film archival sector ever-shifting software and digital formats have recast celluloid's slow decay as, by comparison, stable; the disjuncture between copyright laws designed for physical artifacts and the legal needs of digitized cultural forms has led to an impasse; and more. But of particular relevance to the cultural work of heritage institutes has been the ability of texts to slip their moorings and float freely in networked spaces. While often framed as a legal issue, of concern to rights holders, and an economic issue, of concern to those benefitting financially from control, this slippage, as De Klerk argues, also has profound implications for context. It has enabled films to become separated from their institutional settings, to become disaggregated from the contextual wraps that typically accompanied them.

Heritage institutes, it seems, have put a premium on digitization and access, but in many cases that has meant shifting budgetary and staff resources away from the work of contextualization (research, programming, public presentation). Yes, we have a growing mass of digitized 'assets', but from a cultural heritage perspective things such as provenance, print versions, and the many traces born by celluloid that combine to make them rich historical palimpsests and learning opportunities are too often absent, ignored, or beyond budgetary reach. Digitization has too often worked to flatten our film past, disambiguating text from context, and leaving great potential in its wake. And in the cases where this has happened, viewers are left simply to free-associate with the filmic shards they stumble across, rather than encountering them as portals to informed experience, cultural knowledge, and communication.

Of course, disambiguation is not a necessary condition of the digital. Indeed, well-curated DVDs and websites offer multiple versions and rich documentary contextualization of particular titles, and stand as strong counterexamples. And easy access to digital prints across multiple archives provides low-hanging fruit for researchers and those interested in the histories and comparative analysis of prints, while enhancing the opportunities for film identification in those cases where credits are unknown. But these endeavors require expertise, initiative, support, reference collections, and so on … elements that have long taken

institutional form in the film archives, cinematheques, and film museums at the core of De Klerk's argument. The digital has not magically taken up these tasks, nor ceded them to the wisdom of the crowd. But it has, potentially at any rate, enabled new partnerships and offered new tools to heritage institutes.

The near parallel turn towards what might, in shorthand terms, be labeled a neo-liberal agenda has exacerbated this disambiguation of text and context. Since the 1990s, governmental policies in many western nations have increasingly embraced deregulation, fiscal austerity, and reductions in government spending and simultaneous privatization of sectors once supported by the public. Cultural organizations that once enjoyed ample governmental support saw their budgets shrink and were forced to scramble in order to sustain themselves and build their audiences. Gift shops, restaurants, after-hour rentals of gallery space, 'blockbuster shows', and increased admission fees emerged as vital profit opportunities, while many formerly core activities such as research, educational outreach, collections, and programming lost their centrality and with it, budgets.

Film heritage institutions have not been spared these pressures. Initially, digitization seemed like a solution, offering a way to extend reach, expand audience, build DVD and web-portal revenues, and for a brief moment emerged as a rare growth area in a time of budgetary cutbacks. Alas, the hard work of research and context-building too often paid the price. And ironically, that bill was due just as freshly minted digital film formats offered new opportunities for heritage institutions to do what they have traditionally done best, and to do it in creative new ways: contextualize their holdings.

The twin dynamics of digitization and neo-liberal governmental policies are inexorably intertwined with a larger dynamic of cultural and social change that will continue to play out in the first few decades of the 21st century. Contemporary audiences enjoy unparalleled access to global cultural production; new distribution pathways including social media offer robust alternatives to the monopolies once enjoyed by centralized heritage institutions; and participation has displaced consumption as a dominant cultural modality. Rather than authorized cultural institutions 'pushing' a carefully curated cultural agenda, audiences are 'pulling' on-demand the pieces that they find interesting, remixing and sharing them with their circle of friends. They are using media where and when they want to.

These are powerful if not yet fully understood cultural logics. And while read by some as marginalizing the work of heritage institutions by circumventing their monopoly status, this by no means threatens these institutions' relevance. It simply repositions their work, which must now operate in tandem with new distribution systems and a more participatory public. De Klerk draws on scholars such as Anthony Giddens and Howard Becker to argue that heritage institutions should be defined less as cultural bottlenecks and more by such characteristics as expertise, public accountability, trust, and self-reflexivity–characteristics that can actually help to enable the cultural work of the new distribution systems. Film heritage institutions have long preserved, presented, interpreted, and contextualized their digitized works. But De Klerk argues that they do more, elucidating the connections between artifacts and their enabling technologies, going beyond the film text to the larger medium and the lived spaces it inhabits.

This is context that matters! No mere footnote to the text, context offers a working system of knowledge that connects text to medium to larger social developments. And while this context-creation process plays out differently in analogue and digital contexts, it remains the defining element of these institutions' public accountability. Film heritage institutes can embrace their contextual responsibilities as much by maintaining and deploying analogue film technologies and presenting historically responsible programs as by creating new ways to meaningfully present works and their histories in digital settings, all in the interest of a shared and, indeed, participatory culture.

In an era when we rightly celebrate the promise of a more dynamically connected and creatively engaged public for culture, we also need critically to assess that culture's enabling logics. The algorithmic layer behind many of today's digital cultural interactions is itself authored, and we are slowly learning that this authorship has both agency and an agenda, even if both are routinely masked. In this setting, the public accountability of (film) heritage institutes is more urgent than ever. Their expertise and trust is as relevant to the maintenance of a performative *dispositif*, in which the public can experience the analogue technological and textual composites that defined a century of cultural practice, as it is to the new contextualizing strategies designed for digital texts in today's networked and participatory world. Nico de Klerk maps multiple paths and illuminates various strategies towards embracing both goals in the pages ahead.

Culture binds us, is common to us, indeed, enables a lived sense of the first-person plural. Simply deferring to the logics of neo-liberalism will create markets with different buy-in points and cultural participants who shoot from the hip. But markets do not make a public any more than free association makes a culture. And this is where context matters, and why the public accountability of heritage institutes matters. So long as film heritage institutes continue to do the hard work of contextualization, of illuminating the relations among texts, media, and society, we have a hope of creating knowledge, of building shared frames, of finding common cause, even if for purposes of disagreement.

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Preface

This work, a revised and updated version of my 2015 doctoral thesis of the same title, is rooted in my research and curatorial work in a film heritage institute, at the time known as the Nederlands Filmmuseum. During my tenure there my activities focused on film and film-related materials, their histories and contexts that were largely uncharted in both film archiving and film historiography. It was concerned with such topics as early nonfiction film, colonial cinema, the program format or advertising films. Although the original occasion for my employment there was research on early cinema, it soon became a voyage of discovery through the entire archive, a voyage fueled by ongoing surprise. Sheer surprise at the range of materials I had been unfamiliar with. Joyful surprise at the immense variety and wealth of these materials and the opportunities for research and presentation they offered. But an unsettling surprise, too, because I gradually learned that many film heritage institutes were—and are—not in the habit of fully acquainting their public with this variety and wealth of their collections. As my own experiences and ideas have traced a growing awareness of the importance of contexts of all kinds, matched by an increasing dissatisfaction with the almost exclusive approach—and restriction—within film heritage institutes to films as objects of art, I have never ceased wondering about this withholding of wealth. It is this unwillingness to share materials and information with the public that has prompted what follows.

Framed by an introductory and a conclusive chapter, this work's two central parts are complementary. The first argues a specific way of doing film heritage work that is based on the range of sources in the care of institutes dedicated to this heritage. Although in its most widely known form cinema was, and is, a theatrically presented, overwhelmingly popular entertainment, it also appeared, and appears, in various technological supports, for many other purposes besides entertainment or aesthetic enjoyment, in many performative configurations, in many different venues and for many different audience categories. This part, therefore, is structured according to a series of case studies, all based on my own archival work. Each case study explores the histories of an object commonly found in the archives of general (i.e. national or regional) film

heritage institutes. But because these institutes do not commonly or consistently present these objects to the public in screenings or exhibitions nor promulgate their histories in visitor information media, my case studies are also meant as a more general investigation into the public role of heritage institutes.

In the second part I expand on these case studies by contextualizing my observations and experiences in one institute and enlarging this personal 'database' with an exploratory survey, and its evaluation, of the public activities of 24, mostly publicly funded film heritage institutes around the world. "Public activities" here refers to both public presentations and visitor information about those presentations. I call it exploratory, because there is no research of any substantial scope or longitude of such activities.[2] So this is a modest start, essentially based on data collected from these institutes' websites during the month of February 2014. These two central chapters, although they mark the difference between my work in one film heritage institute and the information culled from the other institutes, share the same concern: the institutes' performance of public accountability through the two abovementioned public activities.

To sum up this work: chapter 1 is an introductory chapter, titled 'Shared poverty', in which I present a general account of what I consider the deficient public role of film heritage institutes. Chapter 2, titled 'Unstated understandings', contains the abovementioned case studies of film archival objects and their historical contexts and resonances that are potentially relevant for the public activities these institutes undertake. This chapter concludes with a conceptual apparatus that captures the full range of objects in film heritage institutes' care in order to enable their meaningful presentation. Chapter 3 contains the survey followed by its evaluation. This evaluation zooms in on three aspects of the surveyed institutes' public activities that are emblematic of their poor public performance: the limited temporal range of materials presented to their home public; the lack of transparent and consistent screening policies in an era of technological flux; and the notion of film as a universal language that underlies a general focus on film as an aesthetic object. The survey's

[2] A recently completed PhD examines the policies and their changes of three film heritage institutes; see: Ramesh Kumar, National archives: policies, practices, and histories. A study of the National Film Archive of India, Eye Film Institute Netherlands, and the National Film and Sound Archive, Australia (2016).

database of web information about these public presentations and visitor information of the month in which it was conducted cannot be retrieved in its entirety anymore. Readers interested in this research source are advised to send a request to the author.[3] In the final chapter 4 I present my conclusions, the most general and critical of which is that the transfer of full, up-to-date knowledge to their publics is not film heritage institutes' major concern. And this, I argue, contributes in its turn to their marginal intellectual and moral position in the public sphere. However, as my conclusions are programmatic, I also present a number of suggestions to counteract this marginality and improve the performance of public accountability and meaningfulness, notably on the basis of digital technology.

Next, a brief word about the term *film heritage institutes*. I use this admittedly burdensome term to cover various types of institute dedicated to the custodianship of the film heritage of a given society. This role of the custodian can be seen as taking three functionally different forms: there are institutes that are solely devoted to collecting, researching, describing and/or preserving film and film-related materials; others necessarily restrict themselves to public presentations only, as they have no collections of their own; and then there are institutes whose presentations may draw on the archival collections they preserve, describe and/or research. One might distinguish these types by different terms: film archives, cinematheques, and film museums, respectively. However, the official names of my set of 24 institutes surveyed shows that this distinction in nomenclature is merely academic. Functionally, the institutes in my set would be museums, as they all have collections that are featured, to a lesser or greater degree, in their public presentations. But as most of them are called *cinematheque* or *archive*, I use *film heritage institute* instead as a catch-all term.

In writing this work two sociological works functioned as signposts: Howard Becker's *Art worlds* and Anthony Giddens's *The consequences of modernity*.[4] Becker, in his classic book, took a contrary approach to the

[3] This database is a Word file listing all 24 film heritage institutes' presentations and their visitor information about these presentations for the month of February 2014; the original designs and layouts as well as illustrations have been elided. Requests can be addressed to: nhdeklerk@gmail.com.

[4] Howard S. Becker, *Art worlds* (1984 [1982]); Anthony Giddens, The consequences of modernity (2013 [1990]).

mainstream sociology of art, which at the time—the early 1980s—customarily took "the artist and art work (...) as central to the analysis of art as a social phenomenon." He, however, defined his approach "in a more technical way, to denote the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for."[5] It means, for instance, that artists who produce outsized work or have outrageous ideas relative to the conventions within specific art worlds will have more trouble finding outlets and co-workers to realize these works and ideas. (And if, in the end, they do, that doesn't necessarily mean that the artist is a genius and the rest of us are duffers; it may, for instance, have been the outcome of someone in that network who was willing, for whatever reason, to take a risk.) I found the idea of art worlds a sobering concept for its focus on how a work of art—or, more generally, a cultural product—is created and finds its way into the world; on its material and personal resources; and on the conventions (including aesthetics) that contribute to its acceptance by distributing organizations (archives, museums, galleries, concert halls, publishers, TV stations, etc.). Becker's work has been grouped under an approach called the production of culture, which studies the conditions that determine which products have a greater chance of becoming part of the culture by virtue of their being published, performed, broadcast or otherwise exposed to an audience.[6] A most important aspect that this approach brings sharply in the crosshairs is that of the gatekeeper: "a gatekeeper filters products (or people) as they enter or leave a system."[7] It is the gatekeeper function that captures the abovementioned public activities of film heritage institutes that I focus on in what follows.

Establishing what it is that these institutes allow to leave their gates is not merely a matter of what they put out. The very limits they set as gatekeepers also affect their publics' sense of their film heritage and its histories. That, however, is not easy to account for. In effect, Becker does not accommodate the public into his scheme of things, except in the shape of art criticism, and even then largely as input for those very

[5] Becker (1984), pp. xi; x.

[6] See for an overview: Victoria D. Alexander, Sociology of the arts: exploring fine and popular forms (2011 [2003]), pp. 65-172; see also: Diana Crane, The production of culture: media and the urban arts (1994 [1992]).

[7] Alexander (2011), p. 76.

producers' and distributors' considerations. Surely, it would take a completely different approach and a different type of research to get a sense of what publics take away from cultural artifacts, and their publicity, on offer. (For instance, a recent study on this topic was based on archival and ethnographic research and focused on one location, Nottingham, England; I suspect that the necessarily empirical aspect of such studies makes the local level the most feasible.[8]) But reception per se is not what I am actually after in this book, rather what it is that visitors are offered.

Here, then, Anthony Giddens takes over from Becker, particularly with his concept of *expert systems*, which he defines as impersonal "systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of the material and social environment in which we live today", and how they are accepted and feed into a society's members' concepts and practices.[9] This term allows one to evaluate the completeness and soundness of the film heritage institutes' professional expertise to which the public is exposed. In other words, the moment of publicizing their presentations provides heritage institutes not just with an opportunity, but also a responsibility to put reliable contextual and historical information forward for consideration and to potentially enrich visitors' encounters with their artifacts. "Potentially" means, of course, that the public does not have to like or believe what it is they offer. As a typical characteristic of modern life, according to Giddens, expert systems merely proffer *claims* to truth and expertise. Their success lies in the ways they are able to convince their publics of their authoritativeness. Of course, the word *convince* does not imply a mere capitulation to one or another current popular taste or ideological position. Quite on the contrary, at the very least it should be a function of the state-of-the-art knowledge that—in this particular case—film heritage institutes are mandated and expected to have. There, opportunities present themselves to harness that trust—another central term in Giddens's work—to other ends.

Unlike, say, a film studio or record company that markets the products it has selected and developed from a much larger range of works and proposals submitted (which for all practical purposes will remain forever unknown), film heritage institutes make public only a selection, predominantly in broad terms of a number of film genres or types, from

[8] Mark Jancovich, Lucy Faire with Sarah Stubbings, *The place of the audience: cultural geographies of film consumption* (2008 [2003]).

[9] Giddens (2013), p. 27.

the much larger range of artifacts they *have* accepted as belonging to that heritage—and which therefore need not remain forever unknown to the public. According to their mandates, film heritage institutes are about their collections and their histories—i.e. their films' and film-related objects' presence at certain places, at certain times—, and what they show and tell about them, whether they are about war or slapstick. In promotional terms, their expertise of cinema and its histories is their unique selling proposition. In professional terms, if a film heritage institute has no such expertise to offer, it threatens to drift from its public and societal underpinnings.

Much of my outlook on film heritage work was formed during the first decade of my tenure at the Nederlands Filmmuseum, where I enjoyed the intellectual stimulus of a number of colleagues. Prominent among them were Daan Hertogs, who was responsible for hiring me, and Hoos Blotkamp, who was the museum's director between 1987 and 2000. In fact, it was she who guided the transformation of the museum from a rather sleepy place into a leader in the field of both archival and public activities by 'collecting' a number of people whose ideas and vision led to an astonishingly rich and creative phase in the museum's existence. It was a time during which I was allowed to learn and then demonstrate how any type of material, film or film-related, canonical or totally unknown, could result in exciting work.

In recognition of the complete trust and the freedom bestowed on me during this significant time, I dedicate this work to Daan Hertogs and to the cherished memory of Hoos Blotkamp (1943-2014).

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