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INTRODUCTION

Objects, archives and collections

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Media history is the study of the optical, sonic, haptic and information systems of the past. It seeks to understand the role of technical devices in mediation and how these machines and techniques allowed people to see, hear, record and reimagine the world in different ways. As others have shown, media history is a kind of archaeology, in that it extracts information from often buried fragments that make up the surviving traces of historical media systems. Like an archaeologist, the media historian can use fragments to reveal the everyday conditions and processes of the past, to reveal how people used machines to organise and understand the world. We can use the objects and sources that survive in museums and private collections to reveal an obscure world that they once played a role in creating, and we can also use their own materiality to reveal historic objects' conditions of existence, from design and manufacture, to use and disuse, to preservation and our own appreciation.

This issue of *Early Popular Visual Culture* considers how we use collections of objects and documents. As historians of media and popular culture, we work with the preserved fragments of the past to construct and understand a series of formative moments and precursors to our shared cultures, technologies and everyday lives. We would know nothing of these moments without the sources that reveal them to us. For some, this means scouring newspapers for direct testimony of events, or building data sets from trade directories and patents, or reading trade journals and primary written accounts, or looking closely at old projectors and cameras, or studying the films and artistic output of an era. That these sources are available to us at all is a result of the efforts of many individuals and institutions. We may feel pride in our discovery of a vital new source in the depths of an archive, but that this scrap of paper, its box, catalogue entry and storage facility, is there at all is a minor miracle of organisation. Almost every source we use is available to us because of an infrastructure that collected and preserved it. Sources imply archives, museums, private collectors, online databases, compendiums of documents, bibliographies and libraries. All of these exist because, at one time or another, someone decided that it would be a good idea to collect something of importance and offer it to others for research.

Each historic collection and archival infrastructure has different operational functions, aims and practices. The role of an archive is to collect historical records (on paper, film or hard drive), to store them, arrange them and provide access to researchers for data collection or historical interpretation. They also exist to ensure the accountability of governments and

institutions, and to preserve a record of decisions and events. Libraries have a similar role but focus on published texts. Rare books libraries have the same preservative mandate that archives have, but, as a library, are generally intended to promote living scholarship, where books (and other media) are collected for their value to researchers, educators and a reading public. Material objects and documents change their function in the act of preservation. Archival infrastructure filters cultural practice by selecting historic objects for collection, preservation and study. All publications and books are meant to be read and interpreted whether or not they are housed in a library, but to archive an object or document is to redefine it as being of value.

Museums can house archives of objects and physical samples, but may also have important display and education functions which can lead to them having quite different aims and everyday practices. Many have excellent research facilities where scholars are given direct access to collections in the pursuit of knowledge. But there are many museums without budgets or staff to facilitate access to their collections or, indeed, do not even have access as an operational aim. Private collectors may look to store objects and documents, but have no requirement to offer research access, or even to preserve the collection. Many collectors are interested in the use of their collection, setting their machines to work even where this might damage them; this often distinguishes the passionate enthusiasm of private collectors and volunteer-run historical societies from institutional museums and archives. Despite the lack of institutional mandate, many collectors open their collections to researchers, offering their objects, documents and personal knowledge in the service of historical knowledge. For every institution or individual there is a unique cluster of aims and infrastructures that differently enables research.

Similarly, every researcher has a different set of aims and scholarly practices that intersect with these institutions; we are differently enabled by them, depending on how we conduct research and what kind of institutions we regularly engage with. Phillip Roberts spends much of his time working directly with objects, both because he has access to collections at the National Media Museum and Science Museum, and because his research is enriched by the vast number of lanterns, slides, optical toys, microscopes and other instruments that are held in the National Museum of Science and Industry collection. Much of his time is spent making the most of this collection from a research perspective, and while it still requires support from a range of additional sources, documents, books and objects, his work is led by the implications of access to collections and inclusion in institutional apparatuses. As Stephen Bottomore shows in this issue, his own research mostly uses libraries and documentary archives because his research, which focuses on the experience of cinema practice and spectatorship, is best advanced through these infrastructures. There is more information to be found about people's experience of cinema through written documents (books, newspapers, trade journals, etc.) than through surviving machines and objects, even if these may also enrich documentary findings. However, as Roberts shows in this issue, instruments and their software provide the best indications of their own manufacture, so to understand media production it is wise to adopt a methodology that makes use of surviving physical evidence. In each case, research is a dialogue between our own aims and each institution's modes of operation.

The essays in this issue expose the practice of research in a way usually edited out of published articles. The collected essays emphasise the historical practice of each author in working with collections, as researchers, looking to write histories from the various

fragments held in collections, but also recounting their role as curators, managing and caring for objects within institutions and using them to present histories in galleries and interactive events. The line between these two positions is quite blurred, as each contributor uses various scholarly and curatorial methods to enrich our understanding of the past. This has resulted in some unusual essays. The authors are historians of media and popular culture, but these collected essays are histories of their recent professional work. As a result, their personal convictions, circumstance and happenstance become central factors helping to institutionalise early popular visual culture in collections, museums, catalogues and exhibitions. Producing work that is part professional memoire, part reflexive methodology, and to be sure still part historical analysis, the authors have each focused on the practicalities of problem-solving in historical research: extrapolating across disparate sources, exploiting newly digitised catalogues and collections, inferring through the interstices of parts and fragments of objects. As a whole, the issue scans the range of professional practices involved in getting early popular visual culture displayed, preserved and known by historical researchers and the wider public. Collectively, the authors have worked in museums, archives, libraries and private collections, in person and online, as staff and as researchers, and altogether, the issue documents some of the archival infrastructure behind media history.

The first article in the issue is by Stephen Bottomore, who reflects on the practice of archival and library research over his long career as a researcher. He considers the changing landscape of scholarship, as collections of texts and documents are transformed by emerging digital collections and the search capabilities of online databases. The new digital landscape has become the reality for almost all historical scholarship, but is not often reflected on. Bottomore considers the ongoing need for physical collections and demonstrates the impact of different (physical, digital, archival) infrastructures on the possibilities open to historical scholarship.

This is followed by Roberts' article on writing object-led history. He is currently working with the National Media Museum on a research project that uses the extensive collection of magic lanterns, slides and optical toys to understand the lantern trade in the nineteenth century. In part, he works on cataloguing and organisational tasks, through which he endeavours to make the collections usable for research purposes. But he has also expended significant efforts on methodological questions, asking how to best embed objects into historical writing. In this article, he presents some reflections on research practice, using the case of the early nineteenth century optician and lantern-maker Philip Carpenter to suggest methods for extracting historical information from physical objects. He shows how material analysis can be used to make objects tell their own stories and suggest methods for expanding these into more developed historical frameworks. He proposes a material history of manufacturing in the early nineteenth century as a methodological framework for integrating close material study into a broader history of the lantern in the period.

Sarah Dellmann's article expands this perspective to consider the various practical difficulties surrounding material research that begins with archival objects. She explores the relationship between institutional practices and her own research, before opening the debate towards issues concerning documentation and large data sets. Dellmann is currently working on 'A Million Pictures: Magic Lantern Slide Heritage as Artefacts in the Common European History of Learning', a collaborative research project across several European universities and museums, so she is well placed to consider the connections between historical research, collections management and the dissemination opportunities for large

(and often neglected) collections of objects. This project is equally concerned with pure historical findings and making data available to researchers and the public. Dellman's work shows that one key methodological concern for historians and curators is how to make a collection accessible and usable. Collections exist to preserve, but they also seek to make objects and sources usable in various scholarly and creative fashions.

Stephen Herbert worked for many years as a curator at BFI's Museum of the Moving Image (MOMI, now closed) and has a bulging portfolio of academic publications, exhibitions and events. In his article, he approaches the MOMI collections from the inside, discussing various institutional practices and operations from his time at the museum. Herbert traces the genesis of the museum, its early inspiration and developments and presents his own involvement in curating a number of temporary exhibitions. Collections are repositories for research, but they also tend to be attached to galleries for public exhibition. Herbert explores the display functions of museum collections and shows how this form of museum practice can be an alternative way of disseminating research findings (as well as the many problems that can be encountered when doing this). Ultimately, following years of internal and broader political disputes, MOMI was closed in 1999. Herbert explores the demise of the museum and suggests alternative practices for media museums.

Frank Gray's essay explores the development of an exhibition on cinematic colour technologies at the Screen Archive South East. Gray uses his experience as both a researcher and head of a moving picture archive to show the common practices embedded in each. He shows how an exhibition of objects and other materials can be an important research output in its own right and follows the different threads presented by the exhibition's contents. Various moments in the history of colour are presented through reference to a cluster of machines and objects – projectors, cameras, photographs, lantern slides and primary documents. Gray considers how a history can be embedded in a space and told through dimensional objects, using a careful arrangement of fragments to tell an extensive history of technological development.

Finally, Deac Rossell closes the issue with a quartet of guiding principles for early cinema research. These do not attempt to provide a blueprint for research practice, but suggest ways of conducting research so as to open up new, and perhaps neglected, areas of knowledge. For Rossell, original research contributions are made by challenging existing knowledge and materials, asking questions that have not been posed for decades and re-interrogating old stories with new research methods. Rossell supports each principle with examples from his own research, showing how an opportune find, an unnoticed error in the accepted literature or an old machine, seen again from a new perspective, have each led to new discoveries. He closes his article, and the issue, with a short statement on the ongoing research challenges that we all face, suggesting several trajectories for researchers to follow. Many of the figures he gives as being in need of further study – John Carbutt's celluloid production or Henry Heyl's projecting phenakistoscope – are drawn from his own research discoveries and varied reading. But moreover, as his quartet of principles suggests, there are many more individuals, companies, machines and practices that we are not even aware of, or that are known but not understood properly. The most pertinent research projects of the future are perhaps yet to be revealed.

As a whole, the issue aims to spotlight how research on early popular visual culture is also a professional practice that takes place in dialogue with institutions, and across other professional practices such as film preservation, library cataloguing, archival and collections

management, and museum display and curation. The unwieldy boundaries between research and practice partly derive from the deliberately expansive purview of historical visual culture as a research mandate. The field embraces an inherently intermedial and transmedial framework because historical entertainments and illustrated objects had an itinerant, ephemeral character, simultaneously employing multiple novelties and technologies. Our historical research is intermedial, itinerant and ephemeral in turn. The materials, knowledge and documents behind our research are often scattered: collected rather than preserved, saved rather than filed, vernacular and unofficial rather than regulated and archived. This research context requires inventive methods for studying fragments and ephemera, often dispersed across fragmentary and ephemeral collections and archives. This issue aims to open a dialogue on the everyday practice of researching in collections and archives. As each of these essays show, research infrastructures are complex and changeable spaces that can be confronted in many different ways. We hope to reveal some of the processes through which collections differently enable research practices, and some ways that researchers can approach collections so as to make new lines of enquiry possible.