Reconsidering the Archive: Digitization and Latin American Film Historiography

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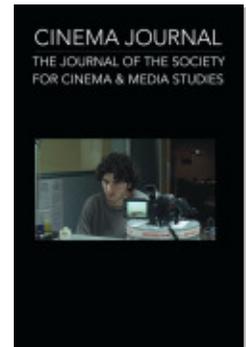
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Reconsidering the Archive: Digitization and Latin American Film Historiography

by Rielle Navitski

O ver the past decade, the drive toward digitization and online access has created new means of disseminating Latin American cinema and documents relating to its history. From personal blogs on film history that are richly illustrated with period images to new data-based scholarship, especially in the field of early cinema, the scholarly and popular interest generated by digital archives is abundantly clear.[1] Yet digital remediation and access (re)produce methodological challenges that are especially thorny in the case of Latin America, where the scarcity of financial resources and the often vexed relationship between cultural institutions and the state have often rendered archival preservation fragmentary and politically fraught.

Digitization exemplifies a fundamental archival dilemma: the frequent incompatibility of preservation and access. Just as celluloid is a superior preservation medium for moving images, microfilm remains readable longer than digital files, and a digitization-only policy threatens the long-term survival of documents.[2] Furthermore, by striving to make ubiquitous, on-demand access the norm, digitization can compound the archive's elision of its own gaps and silences—what Jacques Derrida called the anarchive. In his influential *Archive Fever*, in part a reflection on the digital, Derrida argues that the material impermanence of all archival storage makes it impossible to separate the drive for preservation from the "violence of forgetting."[3] Referring to the physical substrate of archives, he writes, "right on that which permits and conditions archivization, we will never find anything other than

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1 For example, Paul S. Moore, "Moving Picture Postcards: Local Views in North American Picture Shows before the Nickelodeon," and Maria A. Velez-Serna, "Mapping Showmanship Skills and Practices in Scotland," both papers presented at the Twelfth International Domitor Conference, Brighton, United Kingdom, 2012.

2 Archival best practices call for simultaneous preservation on microfilm and access on digital. See Elena García Puente and Lola Rodríguez, "The Hemeroteca Digital of the National Library of Spain," in *Digital Scholarship*, ed. Marta Mestrovic Deyrup (New York: Routledge, 2008), 49–71; Bernard F. Reilly and James Simon, "Shared Digital Access and Preservation Strategies for Serials at the Center for Research Libraries," *Serials Librarian* 59 (2010): 271–280.

3 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 79.

that which exposes to destruction, and in truth menaces with destruction, introducing, *a priori*, forgetfulness . . . into the heart of the monument."[4]

The tensions inherent to archiving are foregrounded by digital obsolescence and the imperative of access. Given the limited resources available to many Latin American institutions, archival material that has not been digitized (and often, never microfilmed or properly stored), or whose digital format is outdated, is threatened with effective erasure from the historical record. When institutions outside the region work to fill this preservation gap, they risk reinforcing a neocolonial dynamic of knowledge production, encouraging the concentration of documents from and scholarship about emerging world regions in Europe and the United States. Obstacles to consulting documents collected elsewhere, often behind institutional paywalls, are compounded by the limited and uneven penetration of Internet access in many Latin American and Caribbean nations.[5]

As these references to the opportunities and challenges of digitization suggest, my purpose in this brief essay is twofold. First, I provide a guide to online resources for historical research on Latin American cinema, from audiovisual material and iconography to digital newspapers and magazines. Second, I highlight theoretical and methodological questions raised by digitization in the context of Latin American film historiography. A key question is the opposition between open-access models, favored by Latin American cultural institutions and linked to a rhetoric of cultural patrimony, and access by subscription only, whether on an individual or an institutional basis.[6] This model dominates in the United States, where some of the most comprehensive collections of Latin American periodicals and documents are housed.

These divergent approaches stem from differing conceptions of cultural capital. In North America, a legal distinction was drawn between art and commerce in the silent era, and cinema aligned with the latter.[7] By contrast, in Latin America, despite neoliberal tendencies toward privatization, cinema continues to be viewed as an expression of national identity, simultaneously funded and policed by the state.[8] Partnerships between cultural institutions and private enterprise have fueled archival digitization in Latin America; however, most collections remain open access.[9] This approach is

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4 Ibid., 12.

5 Barney Warf, "Diverse Spatialities of the Latin American and Caribbean Internet," *Journal of Latin American Geography* 8, no. 2 (2009): 125–145. The growing popularity of smartphones has altered this situation to some extent, but economic and infrastructural obstacles remain.

6 A useful discussion of cultural patrimony and its construction through discursive and social practices in the Latin American context is found in Lisa Breglia, *Monumental Ambivalence: The Politics of Heritage* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006).

7 I am referring to the case *Mutual Film Corporation v. Ohio State Censorship Ordinance* (236 U.S. 230, 1915), which ruled that cinema was an industrial product rather than protected speech under the First Amendment. See Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 198–202.

8 Randal Johnson, "In the Belly of the Ogre: Cinema and the State in Latin America," in *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, ed. John King, Ana M. López, and Manuel Alvarado (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 204–213.

9 Banamex is a sponsor of the Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México, while the semipublic Brazilian oil company Petrobras sponsors the Museu Lasar Segall's Biblioteca Digital das Artes do Espetáculo and the J. Carlos em Revista project, which I discuss herein.

pragmatic: if Latin American states aim to preserve a (selective) brand of cultural specificity in the face of globalization, it is in their interest to facilitate the online circulation of documents of national history and culture through state institutions. By contrast, US companies such as LexisNexis, ProQuest, and NewsBank demonstrate the profitability of making newspaper and magazine archives digitally accessible for a fee.

While paywalls place clear limits on our access to archives, database and interface design more subtly condition researchers' interactions with historical sources. This tendency is exemplified by the growing dominance of optical character recognition (OCR) software. This now-familiar tool renders the visual content of PDF images as keyword-searchable text, encouraging a language-based mode of interacting with historical artifacts. At the opposite end of the spectrum from the OCR-mediated archive, many national libraries and archives offer online thematic collections that approach the paradigm of the "virtual museum." By presenting an ostensibly representative collection of objects or texts online, thematic collections can spark browsers' interest but also encourage a fetishistic relationship to historical artifacts. The thematic collection deliberately forgoes the impossible fantasy of completeness attached to the archive as a whole.

My attempt to chart the rapidly shifting panorama of online digital archives is also conceived as an inevitably incomplete project, one that will go out of date before its publication, as new collections are added, documents are removed, and websites are revamped or go dark. However, the effort may be valuable, if only to counter approaches to the archive that encourage the hoarding of knowledge, or the leveraging of exclusive access to neglected or newly uncovered collections, as a means of increasing the cultural capital attached to one's scholarly work. Writing from the perspective of media archaeology, Wolfgang Ernst argues that "the notion of the archive in Internet communication tends to move the archive toward an economy of circulation: permanent transformations and updating."[10] By exploring new resources available for research and teaching on a region that has often been underrepresented in the field of film studies, I hope to encourage the further incorporation of Latin American film culture into new economies of intellectual circulation.

In the face of the (unauthorized) sharing of moving images on sites like YouTube and Vimeo, a handful of Latin American film archives have begun to stream audiovisual content, though their efforts are modest compared with institutions like the British Film Institute and the National Film Board of Canada, which monetize access to some video content. As of this writing, the Cineteca Nacional de Chile makes 120 Chilean films, dating from the silent era to the present, freely available for streaming on its website.[11] These films can also be accessed through a searchable database on the Cine Chile website. The site gathers together more than seven hundred features, including the collection of the Cineteca de la Universidad de Chile, which have been made

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10 Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive*, ed. Jussi Parikka (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 99.

11 "Archivo Digital," Cineteca Nacional de Chile, http://cinetecadigital.ccplm.cl/pel%C3%ADculas-online.

available for free streaming.[12] The Banco de Conteúdos Culturais (Bank of Cultural Contents), a project of the Cinemateca Brasileira, boasts almost thirty features from pioneering studios Atlântida and Vera Cruz, active from the 1930s through the 1950s; scores of silent and animated films; news reports and soap operas from the TV Tupi network; and a rich array of film stills and posters.[13] The Filmoteca de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México streams a more limited selection of films produced and restored by the archive, including silent features.[14]

While relatively few Latin American films are available from online archives, digital collections of periodicals from the region have expanded rapidly. These collections are indispensable for film historical research, especially given the discontinuity of film production in the region and the resulting lack of well-kept film studio archives. The two most significant sites are the Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México—the term *hemeroteca* refers to a serials archive—which became freely available online in 2011, and Brazil's Biblioteca Nacional Digital, launched in 2006 and greatly expanded over the past few years.[15] While the former focuses on public domain material from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the latter includes relatively recent publications, although newspapers that are still active commercially, like the *Estado de São Paulo* and Rio's *Jornal do Brasil*, are not available on the site.

While no other national libraries currently possess online periodicals archives rivaling these two sites, a number offer thematic collections of rare documents, photographs, and iconography. The Memoria Chilena project of the Biblioteca Nacional Digital de Chile hosts several such collections on cinema, ranging from an exploration of Chilean filmmakers in exile to photographs of historical movie theaters to a section on the nation's film magazines.[16] This section features issues of *Écran* (1930–1969), along with select numbers of *Séptimo arte* (Seventh Art), *Cine foro* (Cinema Forum), *Primer plano* (Close-Up), and *Enfoque* (Focus), published between the 1950s and the 1980s.

An increasingly rich array of such film magazines is currently being made freely available online. Digitized magazines open new avenues for the study of film culture and the reception of imported cinema in the region, topics that have often been neglected in favor of recuperating national histories of film production. Brazil's most significant early film magazines, *A cena muda* (The Silent Scene, 1921–1955) and *Cinearte* (1926–1942), can be downloaded in PDF format (unusually, not enabled for OCR) from the Biblioteca Digital das Artes do Espetáculo, a project of the Museu Lasar Segall in São Paulo.[17] The site J. Carlos em Revista, devoted to the work of a well-known

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12 See the website Cine Chileno Online, at http://www.cinechile.cl/cineonline/php.

13 "Banco de Conteúdos Culturais," Cinemateca Brasileira, http://www.bcc.org.br.

14 "Cine en línea," Filmoteca de la UNAM, http://www.filmoteca.unam.mx/cinelinea/.

15 "Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México," Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, http://www.hndm.unam.mx; "Biblioteca Nacional Digital," Biblioteca Nacional—Brasil, http://bndigital.bn.br.

16 "Memoria Chilena," Biblioteca Nacional de Chile, http://www.memoriachilena.cl/602/w3-channel.html.

17 "Biblioteca Digital das Artes do Espetáculo," Museu Lasar Segall, http://www.bjksdigital.museusegall.org.br. Brazil's Biblioteca Nacional Digital includes a keyword-searchable version of the magazine.

Brazilian caricaturist, contains the 1922–1930 run of the magazine *Para todos*, which contained considerable coverage of both imported and Brazilian cinema.[18]

The Biblioteca Digital Hispánica, an initiative of the Biblioteca Nacional de España, offers a rich collection of illustrated magazines, including those published outside Spain.[19] The archive contains the Buenos Aires and Montevideo versions of the magazine *Caras y caretas*, published between 1898 and 1939, an invaluable resource for charting the emergence of mass culture in Argentina and Uruguay. Another website based in Spain, Memoria de Madrid, features issues of *Cinelandia y films*, a Spanish-language magazine published in Los Angeles, dating between 1930 and 1936. The publication is hosted in partnership with the Hemeroteca Municipal de Madrid.[20] In the United States, the Media History Digital Library made thirty years of *Cine-Mundial*, a Spanish-language magazine printed in New York by the publishers of *Moving Picture World*, available online in November 2013. In their print and digital forms, these publications attest to a Latin American film culture produced and archived outside the region's geographic borders. Their preservation in libraries in the United States and Spain is an index of their global circulation and, by extension, of the transnational character of film culture in Latin America in the face of imported cinema's market dominance.

The Media History Digital Library's addition of *Cine-Mundial* diversifies a collection previously dominated by English-language publications, with few exceptions. A more sweeping change came earlier in 2013 with the debut of Lantern, a keyword search function that spans all its publications.[21] This implementation of OCR promises to drastically shorten the hours, weeks, or months that researchers previously spent scouring paper and microfilm documents. The keyword searches made possible by OCR alter the linear character of access to historical documents (especially when reproduced on a roll of microfilm through which the researcher must scroll), replacing it with nonlinear, networked access. Yet if OCR seems to sweep away the sheer weight and extension of physical documents, it tends to replace them with another form of accumulation. By allowing the rapid discovery and downloading of image files and PDFs, online digital collections foster the proliferation of personal digital archives in excess of our capacity to review and catalog them, as Laura Isabel Serna has signaled.[22] Our knowledge that primary materials are accessible to us on demand, whether online or on our hard drives, can encourage an endlessly deferred encounter with the documents themselves.

Furthermore, beyond the loss of context that can result from nonlinear access to historical sources, OCR tends to reify a researcher's approaches, from auteurist criticism to star studies to the privileging of a single film text, by limiting the field of inquiry to pages in which the keywords appear. Derrida argues that the "technical

18 "O projeto," J. Carlos em Revista, http://www.jotacarlos.org.

19 "Hemeroteca Digital," Biblioteca Nacional de España, http://hemerotecadigital.bne.es.

20 "Homepage," Memoria de Madrid, http://www.memoriademadrid.es.

21 "Lantern," Media History Digital Library, http://lantern.mediahist.org.

22 Eric Hoyt, "Q&A with Laura Isabel Serna about 'Cine Mundial' and New Book 'Making Cinelandia,'" November 7, 2013, http://mediahistoryproject.org/2013/11/07/q-a-with-laura-isabel-serna-about-cine-mundial-and-new-book -making-cinelandia/.

structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content in its very coming into existence and its relationship to the future."[23] The remediation of paper documents with OCR boosts the "archivability" of text over that of image, favoring language-based heuristics and methodologies over approaches from visual studies, with lasting effects on future research.

At the same time, the peculiar temporality of OCR, and digital access in general, can work to foreground the discontinuities inherent in the researcher's relationship to history. Ernst suggests that, with digitization and online access, "the microtemporality of the data-processing operation is . . . superimposed on the historical archive's macrotime."[24] For Ernst, the grand narratives of historical discourse intersect with the "fast memory" of digital access, which tends to erase chronological distance: "Due to ultrafast computer and signal-processing clock rates, these timeframes [of processing and access] are experienced as the present."[25]

Yet in the case of most online digital collections, data processing time is made (frustratingly) perceptible to the researcher in the lag as individual document pages load or as results from a keyword search are populated. The mediation of the archive through digital processing and search algorithms, rather than the researcher's subjective and often inconsistent selection criteria (which are applied over an extended period), might foster awareness of the multiple temporalities that inform our encounters with history. Furthermore, OCR introduces a certain inconsistency in our access to the past, Richard Abel observes, noting that repeated keyword searches can turn up different results.[26] These inconsistencies call attention to the archive's exclusions and gaps, from missing issues of a publication to the discourses shut out of mass-circulation periodicals altogether.

Abel's comments on OCR are based on his extensive research on GenealogyBank, which offers broad coverage of both major newspapers and small-town publications. Published by the NewsBank corporation and targeted to those tracing their ancestry, the site charges a monthly or yearly subscription fee to individuals. GenealogyBank features several Spanish-language newspapers from major US cities and the US-Mexico border region, a rich potential resource for social histories of immigrant and Latino film culture. (NewsBank's educational division Readex also offers a collection of Hispanic American Newspapers.[27]) The geographic breadth of GenealogyBank's database is a sobering contrast to the resources available for regional film histories in Latin America, given fragmentary preservation and the dispersion of relevant documents.

Readex also provides the technological infrastructure for the World Newspaper Archive (WNA), a wide-ranging collection of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century

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23 Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 17.

24 Ernst, *Digital Memory*, 87.

25 Ibid.

26 Richard Abel, "The Perils and Pleasures of Big Data in Digitized Newspapers," *Film History* 25, nos. 1–2 (2013): 1–10.

27 "Hispanic American Newspapers," Readex, http://www.readex.com/content/hispanic-american-newspapers-1808 -1980.

newspapers coordinated by the Chicago-based not-for-profit Center for Research Libraries (CRL). The database acts as a repository for several US universities' collections of periodicals from Latin America and other "world regions with less robust library and preservation structure."[28] Access to the database is through institutional membership. The archive's founding members are US universities, although institutions elsewhere are eligible to join.[29] However, as of this writing, CRL's only member outside the United States and Canada was the University of Hong Kong.[30] If they lack the finances or inclination to become members of CRL, Latin American institutions are unable to access these documents relating to their nation's history and that of other nations that (arguably) occupy the global periphery.

The WNA's geographic breadth is impressive, spanning newspapers from Latin American capitals and major cities, including Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Santiago de Chile, Lima, Caracas, Havana, Belize City, Guatemala City, San Salvador, Tegucigalpa, and Panama City. Secondary cities like Guayaquil, Valparaíso, Veracruz, Jalapa, and Mérida are also represented. However, as of this writing, the collection lacks newspapers from Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Paraguay. Furthermore, because of CRL's decision to digitize only materials in the public domain for the time being, no newspapers dated after 1922 are currently included.[31]

Another closed-access model of institutional cooperation is represented by the database Classic Mexican Cinema. Libraries can purchase online access to the collection outright from Netherlands-based publisher Brill. Made available in partnership with the Filmoteca de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, the database contains some of the only private papers relevant to Latin American cinema available digitally: the scrapbooks of prominent director Fernando de Fuentes. However, most of its collection is composed of film magazines, including *Cinelandia* (1931–1947), *Cine mundial* (1951–1955), and *Cinema repórter* (1943–1965).[32]

In contrast to institutional collaborations based on membership and subscription fees, the Digital Library of the Caribbean (DLOC) is an open-access, cooperative project of universities and archives in the United States, South America, and the Caribbean.[33] The DLOC is conceived as a means of grappling with obstacles to preservation posed by the region's colonial history, including linguistic diversity and the dispersion of documents, often in the metropolis.[34] Using open-source software developed by the University of Florida rather than a proprietary platform, the DLOC uses a collaborative funding model based on grants and in-kind contributions from

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28 Reilly and Simon, "Shared Digital Access," 272.

29 Ibid., 273.

30 "CRL Members," Center for Research Libraries, http://www.crl.edu/membership/members.

31 Reilly and Simon, "Shared Digital Access," 276.

32 The *Cine mundial* included in this database is not the New York publication discussed earlier, but rather a Mexican film magazine that debuted after the first *Cine-Mundial* had folded.

33 See the website of the Digital Library of the Caribbean, at http://www.dloc.com.

34 Shamin Renwick, "Caribbean Digital Library Initiatives in the Twenty-First Century: The Digital Library of the Caribbean (DLOC)," *Alexandria* 22, no. 1 (2001): 3.

member institutions.[35] Resources of interest to the film scholar include the Efraín Barradas Collection, which contains more than 350 Mexican and Cuban film posters, and the Caribbean Digital Newspaper Library. This collection covers publications from the nineteenth century to the present, but extensive runs are few. Two newspapers with comparatively broad chronological coverage are *El diario de la marina* (1899–1909, 1955–1960) and *El mundo* (San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1928–1939). It remains to be seen whether the Digital Library of the Caribbean's cooperative model will allow it to further strengthen its collections while remaining open access to those outside the Caribbean.[36]

Networks of transnational intellectual exchange and support like those fostered by the Digital Library of the Caribbean have a complex relationship to technologies that, precisely by encouraging access anytime, anywhere, can work to isolate the researcher. As Abel notes, the ability to consult digital archives in one's own home or office reduces opportunities for community formation and exchange among researchers, librarians, and archivists.[37] At a time when governmental funding for the humanities is declining, it is an open question whether the online availability of archival materials will undercut grant and fellowship applications for on-site research. Given that obstacles to cataloging of archival materials have been particularly marked in Latin American institutions, researchers may miss opportunities to uncover uncataloged materials through direct contact with archive staff. Even as digitized collections and institutional collaborations increasingly transcend national borders, we must not confuse digitization with democratization or with frictionless access to the past. Rather, it is imperative that, as scholarship on Latin American cinema in English continues to expand, we continue to think through the geopolitics of archiving in a digital age.   ✳

35   Renwick, "Caribbean Digital Library Initiatives," 11–12.

36   The DLOC may charge for access to content in the future; however, its mission statement requires that it remain open access for those located in the Caribbean. Renwick, "Caribbean Digital Library Initiatives," 11.

37   Abel, "Pleasures and Perils," 9.