



Above: Two frames from the 1925 film *Seven Sinners*, one before and one after restoration. PHOTOS: ACADEMY OF MOTION PICTURE ARTS AND SCIENCES/INT

SAVING FILM

Movies As celluloid fast becomes a relic, the race is on to rescue cinematic treasures, writes Manohla Dargis.



If you have ever seen the 1931 film of *The Front Page*, based on the jauntily cynical play, you might have been startled by the moment when a wisecracking newspaperman silences his machine-gun-fast patter to raise his middle finger at the mayor and sheriff.

Is this what *The New York Times* reviewer Mordaunt Hall was thinking of when he wrote that the film's humour is "frequently harsh"?

Probably not. That's because in the version of *The Front Page* that New York newspapers likely reviewed back in 1931, that hack keeps his middle finger in check and instead mock-salutes the mayor and the sheriff. As it turns out, the film seen in the United States and elsewhere for decades isn't the same version that American audiences guffawed through back in the day. The one that Michael Pogorzelski and Heather Linville took out of old film cans in 2014 was surprisingly different from the familiar one.

Pogorzelski, 44, is the director of the Academy Film Archive, which is part of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the organisation behind the Oscars. Linville, 38, is one of its film preservationists. In 2014, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, deposited the Howard Hughes film collection with the academy archive, and the preservationists zeroed in on *The Front Page*.

Archives are designed to store film under proper conditions, which is why collections like this sometimes land there. Other titles are piling up at the academy archive because people are dumping their films.

The industry shift from film to digital has been swift and dramatic and - despite the activist efforts of the patron saint of preservation, Martin Scorsese - film on film has almost disappeared from theatres. Even features shot on film are digitally projected. (Almost all theatres worldwide are now digital.)

Last year, I started following after Pogorzelski and Linville to understand the complexities of film restoration, largely because the medium is fast becoming a relic. More than 50 years ago, Andre Bazin asked, "What is cinema?" But what is film?

It's a question worth asking, because for most of its history, cinema was medium-specific - it was shot, processed and distrib-

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uted on film. The movies we watch today, by contrast, are rarely made through mechanical and photochemical processes, but with computer code, with strings of zeros and ones: bits.

Each medium has its advantages, although for many lovers of film the crucial difference is its vivid, alive look. Much of the cinema I love - Buster Keaton comedies, Fred-and-Ginger musicals, Stan Brakhage avant-garde landmarks, Charles Burnett's masterpiece *Killer of Sheep* - was made with film. What happens to an art when its foundational medium disappears? We don't yet know, because it's happening right now. If you care about movies, you should be wondering.

Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's play *The Front Page* first opened on Broadway in 1928. The writers were former journalists, and the story they whipped up hinges on a hard-boiled Chicago reporter, Hildy Johnson, who's planning to leave the city and the newspaper racket, only to be reeled back

into action by a jailbreak and his conniving editor, Walter Burns. Profane and funny, the play was a hit, and it has returned to Broadway several times since; a new production opens in October. Howard Hawks redefined it by casting Cary Grant as Walter and Rosalind Russell as his ex-wife, Hildy, in the 1940 dazzler *His Girl Friday*. Hawks' brilliant gender-flip has helped eclipse the 1931 film, but the older one has charm, snap and great performances, as well as intelligent, fluid direction from Lewis Milestone, all of which can be hard to appreciate when watching battered copies of copies.

The print from the University of Nevada was, by contrast, in fine shape by the time Pogorzelski and Linville started work. (The George Lucas Family Foundation footed the bill.) Yet this restoration produced its own aha! moments when, while comparing the University of Nevada copy with the Library of Congress print, they saw variations like the middle finger.



In one version, a character quips about Pocahontas, while in the other the wisecrack involves Lady Godiva. Other changes involve camera-work, staging and performances. Some of the differences seemed intentional, others accidental.

It was common practice to shoot multiple versions in the silent era, one for the domestic market and the rest for export. Talking pictures complicated matters, and, with subtitled and dubbing not yet a workable solution, companies shot multiple-language versions.

The academy archive restores 40 to 70 movies a year, which means that the staff is usually handling several titles at once. When Pogorzelski and Linville started on *The Front Page*, Linville was already several years into restoring *Cock of the Air*, another Howard Hughes title.

Directed by Tom Buckingham, this delightful 1932 sex comedy is largely a vehicle for its female star, Billie Dove, who was Hughes' lover back in an especially frenetic time in his movie career. She plays a French actress partial to low-cut gowns, Champagne and conquests, and the film is one long teasing encounter between her and a pilot and Lothario (Chester Morris).

More frothy than scandalous, the film is best explained by the scene in which Dove runs around in a metal suit of armour while chased by Morris, who's holding a can opener. Hughes managed to get *Cock of the Air* into theatres despite the objections of the Production Code's bluenoses (one deemed it "obscene and immoral"), but eventually it was heavily censored.

The film's history of censorship woes help explain how the preservationists ended up dealing with an uncensored yet silent master and a separate, censored audio source.

Preservationists seek out both the best-preserved prints and elements from different film copies, and often work with outside technicians. It's like assembling a jigsaw puzzle with pieces from many copies of that puzzle - pieces that sometimes need to be shipped from France and spruced up in Los Angeles.

Flaws remain because, Pogorzelski said, he has "to stretch dollars as far as they can go". Carrying out a "100 per cent frame-by-frame cleaning" and focusing all of the archive's resources on one film might mean ignoring dozens of others.

To help with the sound for *Cock of the Air*, the preservationists looked to John Polito, an engineer and the owner of Audio Mechanics. Together they worked on the sound using assorted elements they had gathered. After years of vainly searching for prints with the censored dialogue intact, they took the unusual step of hiring actors like Hamish Linklater to record the excised lines, using an onscreen icon to indicate what had been censored. (Polito played some piano music that had also gone missing.) The results are probably close to what viewers saw and heard when they caught a show in 1932.

All movies are time machines, and restoration helps bring the moving-image present together with a past that is always - as prints decay, labs close and money ebbs - moving further away. "We want to preserve films for future generations," Linville said. "So we try to think ahead and think about what future audiences may be interested in."

Some restorations play at festivals, museums and other archival-centric places. They're available for research, and the preservationists hope that a museum the academy has proposed will be yet another place to see them. "Even if every cinema in the world can only show digital," Pogorzelski said, "we know there are going to be at least four theatres that the academy runs that are still going to be showing film."

In 2011, historian David Pierce gave a talk on silent films at an annual event in Los Angeles called the "Reel Thing". At one point, he showed a 1925 photo of a few dozen Universal Pictures stars next to a stack of crates holding that season's negatives. He asked if anyone recognised these stars and was met with mostly bafflement.

We soon found out why. Twenty years after this photo was taken, Universal sent a letter to its East Coast lab ordering the destruction of all but 17 of its silent-film negatives. The studio had already lost numerous older titles in fires, and now it was junking the rest of its silent features - hundreds - having decided that most were not worth keeping. It's no wonder that those stars were unfamiliar: their own studio destroyed their legacy.

Continued next page