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# Saving film

Some legacies may be lost forever; others re-emerge or gain new lustre when films that went missing resurface in a barn or an archive.

In 2015, *Seven Sinners*, Milestone's long-lost feature directorial debut, turned up in Australia and was passed on to the archive, which is restoring the film. Such rescue stories come wreathed in romance as a film is plucked from the brink, like a silent-screen heroine pulled from train tracks at the last minute.

These stories are heartening if misleading, given the industry's habit of destroying its history, which, of course, is our history, too. What wonders existed in the 70 per cent of silent features that are lost? And the problem isn't just the past or preserving it. It's also about access. Film prints of recent releases are now hard to see, and the big studios keep a lot of titles in the vault. Many films have never made it onto VHS, DVD or Blu-ray, and the dream that the internet would turn into a comprehensive cinematic library remains a dream.

The upbeat platitudes that have often accompanied the shift to digital tend to obscure pragmatic considerations, including that film is easier and less expensive to preserve than digital and isn't plagued by the

same obsolescence issues. That's why, even as major studios have stopped distributing film prints, they make film copies of the elements of their new releases, including those shot on digital.

Studios such as 20th Century Fox may maintain digital archives of their current releases, but the "analogue solution," in the words of Schawn Belston, its executive vice-president, media and library services, "is still the most trusted and has well-established archival longevity".

The studios can afford to safeguard their new and old titles, but an estimated 75 per cent of movies in American theatres are made by independents. A few years ago, the Library of Congress and the academy released *Digital Dilemma 2*, a report on the digital preservation issues facing independent filmmakers and non-profit audiovisual archives.

"Most of the filmmakers surveyed for this report have given little thought to what happens to their work once it is completed," the study found. Most were also not aware of "the perishable nature of digital content". Preservation may not be foremost in the minds of these directors – or most moviegoers – but imagine 50 years from now when another archivist asks another audience to name the stars of our digital cinema present, like our own era's screwball beauty, Greta Gerwig.

"Who?" **W**

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