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October 3, 2011
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Access to Moving Image Collections

Leaving the Rock Unturned: Relevancy in Print and Digital Resources

My silent era subject is the Serpentine dance (*Danse Serpentine*) made famous in in pre-/early cinema by the Lumière Brothers, the Edison Company, and performer Loie Fuller. *Mothlight*, Stan Brakhage's 1963 experimental short, is my second selection to explore the coverage of avant-garde material in the indices. Information on both sources is scarce, contrary to my assumptions. The lacking resources speak volumes on what has been ignored by mainstream cinematic ideology and study. This is not a judgment as much as an observation of the scarcity of focus on experimental and pre-cinema work. The indices are materials that succinctly reveal this trend of omission. I chose my subjects immediately upon reading the assignment and chose to approach the print indices first, assuming that I would find an abundance of information online. To my surprise, the most relevant hits revealed themselves in print form.

In a leap of faith, my research strategy began with the print indices. Digital resources are in my comfort zone as a child of the digital age. I glanced through the indices I believed to be irrelevant to my search to find that they would be valuable for other topics. This included a helpful list of Academy Award winners for Best Screenplay following a very straightforward alphabetical format¹. There is a quaint "A Quick Guide to Using this Volume" in a resource that is not useful to me because of its focus on performers – Fuller is not listed and neither are the moths – but notes "readers are invited to make known any incorrect citations, allowing for correction in future supplements"². I found this aside a pleasant departure from the harsh online contact forms hidden on periodical and database websites.

Most of the print resources seemed to invite criticism, modifications, and discussion on themselves and their peer publishing. In Hanson and Hanson's *Film review index*, the authors note "*The International index to film periodicals* and *The Film literature index* [...] are both highly selective as well as relative newcomers to the field" in order to distinguish itself as a

¹ Salem, J. M., *A guide to critical reviews, part IV: the screenplay*, (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1971).

² Schuster, M., *Motion picture performers: a bibliography of magazine and periodical articles, 1960-1969* (1971) & *Supplement* (1970-74), (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press) x.

layman's reference resource³. This is furthered by an explanation of the format and multiple entries: "Each of the film entries includes as many references as are available to the film with four primary reasons for exclusion: redundancy, foreign language sources, lack of common accessibility and lack of substance" to ensure that the user fully grasps the purpose of the index, which focuses on feature-length films from 1903 - 1986⁴. Unfortunately this resource returned less than five results for Lumière in Vol. 1 and no information on Brakhage's film. The *Film review index* is very user-friendly and navigable but failed to produce enough reference material for my needs.

It was very difficult to understand the organization of *The film index: a bibliography*. The work contains 160 "main classifications" and innumerable "subclassifications" that are alphabetical by author, title, or film title. This format pushes back against the user and would be most suitable for browsing. Focused research gets overwhelmed in this index. For the Serpentine dance subject, I gleaned a significant amount of information after combing the subclassifications in Volume 1: PRE-SCREEN HISTORY, COLOR, FANTASY AND TRICK FILM, DANCE, THE FOREIGN FILM – FRANCE, and DANCE. The index led to a Lumière hit which aligns with the introduction to this index as an overview of history thanks to "some few observers in the film's early years who were able to penetrate to the film's basic aesthetic organization"⁵. The three volumes produced no useful information about Brakhage's work, but did produce other tangential hits for my earlier subject. The entries include small summaries that are extremely helpful in determining relevance. Unfortunately these blurbs do not ease the strain of browsing for a specific subject.

MacCann's *The new film index: a bibliography of magazine articles in English, 1930-1970*, is simply a subject index that happens to be chronological. I was tentative because of its brevity and attention to Hollywood. Again, I was surprised. This became one of my most robust print reference resources for *Mothlight*, with eleven relevant hits. It omits film reviews – and therefore popular opinion – and opts for "extended analysis of one or two films"⁶. Linda Batty's

³ Hanson, P. & Hanson, S. (Eds.), *Film review index*. (Vols. 1-2), (Phoenix, Arizona: Oryx Press, 1986-1987) viii.

⁴ Ibid. ix,

⁵ *The film index: a bibliography*, (Vol. 1-3), (New York: Museum of Modern Art & Arno Press, 1966) xxviii.

⁶ MacCann, R. D., & Perry, E.S., *The new film index: a bibliography of magazine articles in English, 1930-1970*, (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc, 1975) xiii.

Retrospective index to film periodicals 1930-1971 produced over fifty Brakhage leads and thirty dance leads. The instructional section of this index explains the difference between Individual Film listings and Subject listings. Strangely, neither of my research topics are in the Individual Film segment and all the information came from scouring the Subjects headings. This resource is not as clunky as *The film index: a bibliography* but took a lot of manipulation on the user's part.

And then, the Internet: the answer to all reference queries with its limitless information and easy interface – or so I thought. For *FIAF*, *BFI* and *The film & television literature index* my first search returned zero hits. After some tweaking of terminology and drop down menu choices, I eventually found interesting material from all three digital reference resources. In *BFI's* resource, it was an uphill battle. The most relevant – and frankly, interesting – search result was from a 1929 publication, “Then comes a singing quartet followed by a ★ serpentine dance by a woman with a false leg which is pulled off by the man in the box”, with a bright blue star next to what I had entered into the keyword search. *BFI's Film index international* is a far-reaching resource covering almost 200 countries and hundreds of thousands of films. I also enjoyed the ability to search within reviews and summaries, which unearthed some gems for my research subjects.

My preference lies with *The film & television literature index* for its uncluttered search form and being able to add or take away buckets. It also boasts itself to a general audience, not specifically scholars. However, its coverage begins in 1914, about twenty years after the heyday of the Serpentine dance. *FIAF's international index to film periodicals* is equally manageable and user-friendly with its ability to search all text in its contents from 1972 onwards. The resource also allows for easy citation building, which is a must for any digital reference effort.

Needless to reiterate, I am surprised with my results. The print reference resources have been most beneficial in my research on the Serpentine dance and *Mothlight*. Their restrictions as physical materials did not outweigh their value in organization and hits. The digital reference resources are helpful and have manageable interfaces, but lacked the manipulation of browsing by an informed researcher. This exercise is crucial in understanding the distinct efficacy of reference material found in print and online.

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