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Comparing References: Books and Online Sources

There is a wonderful anticipation in research. Any step may lead to a brick wall, forcing one to turn around or a lucky shot may hit the jackpot. For my film-related search choices, I selected *The Cat and the Canary* (1927) and *Office Space* (1999), two dissimilar favorites of mine, often falling under the category of cult classics. After glancing over the books, I realized my decision to research *Office Space* would yield no results there, but I decided to keep the choice in order to have a grasp on what relevant material would be available online for the more recent film. I approached each source as though it was the first step in my research and the results range from surprisingly lucrative to highly unsuccessful.

As expected, the wealth of information I found was online. *Film Index International* provided not only listings of articles but also of cast and crew for both of my film titles and these details create several avenues of research. The *Film and Television Literature Index* turned up about seventeen results for *The Cat and the Canary*. Frustratingly, I was only able to link to a few of the articles in full text through NYU and the same occurred for *Office Space*. *FIAT Index to Film Periodicals* produced some interesting results with regards to *Office Space*: over 3,500 search items, plus my online search provided book results. The findings included reviews on books such as Doyle Greene's *The American Worker on Film, 1909-1999*. I searched this on Bobcat and discovered the book is available at NYU. I admit it is unlikely I would have come across this book without the online search. Returning to *FIAT* and using the information through the site I modified my search with directors and actors. Modified search usually operates as a filter for irrelevant material. Several new

results appeared, but many disappeared as well, including the very helpful book reviews. I find modified search to be both a useful and limiting tool. There is information overload with broad searches but useful information can disappear from too much filtering. Both are situations to be wary of.

As I mentioned earlier, all of the books pre-date *Office Space* and my search in this area would only be for *The Cat and the Canary*. *Retrospective Index to Film Periodicals 1930-1971* was the first book I looked at and without much hope based on the dates. The journals listed were chosen by the author for “their excellence, coverage and lasting interest” and selected from the Humanities selection at the University of Oregon (Batty, vii). As I was reading the preface, the scope of information available in the book became narrower. The layout of the book I do appreciate, especially the how-to explaining the content organization. The first section lists individual films titles in alphabetical order, followed by subject divisions as either a theme in film studies or persons of interest and finally book review citations. Each section could provide useful content for today’s standards. *The New Film Index*, similar to *Retrospective*, only lists books from 1930-1970. The introduction provided no explanation as to why the author chose to start with 1930. The table of contents takes up four pages dividing the material into genres and sub-genres. There is no a-z listing of titles but rather a listing of prominent names in the back. This index is unhelpful and unclear as a starting point for my topic. *The Cat and the Canary* (1927) was made before the author’s time frame in both the above publications. As a side note, I was surprised not to see the title at all since at least two remakes were filmed between 1930 and 1950. Amending my title only approach, *Motion Picture Performers* represented some possible prospects in the way of actors. Except the lead actress in *The Cat and the Canary*

was only listed under ‘Performers Not Included in the Bibliography’. Although grateful for the subsection saving me time, I quickly moved on.

A Guide to Critical Reviews, was the most selective of indexes. It only listed films reviewed in the popular press between 1963 and 1980 and then listed them by Academy Award winning. There was one review for *The Cat and the Canary* from a 1978 review, but no information is provided to signify what version. *The Film Index: a Bibliography* would be useful for thematic reference, like *The New Film Index*. On a positive note, the back index of the book provided the a-z list of titles including *The Cat and the Canary*. My film title was under ‘Crime and Detective Films’ with one article from MoMA. A good book to browse through but like the previous one, little information is available for my title search.

Looking through *Film Review Index* v.1 (1882-1949), I held more hope especially since the introduction claimed to “fill the gap left by traditional indexes”. The authors also made a point of acknowledging the limits of a “fixed universe of journals” which is how *Retrospective* is designed (Hanson, vi). The order of index contents (by film title, director, year, country or books) is simple and clear. Going straight to film titles, I was able to locate *The Cat and the Canary* with an unexpected list of ten reviews from a range of sources, including *Selected Film Criticism*, *New York Times*, and *Variety*. A very helpful and smoothly organized find but I did notice there was only the listing for 1927’s *The Cat and the Canary* and not the other versions.

Although it sounds redundant or counter-productive, you need to know what you are looking for in order to look for it. Online searches, though broad, offer excellent starting points for determining what direction to search in and they can also provide unexpected sources. The books were exceptionally limiting for my search. Although I appreciate the introductions and sections on ‘how to use this book’, many are too filtered

down to what the author or authors deem relevant in terms of which films and journals to include. Beginning a search only by film title, I would need to begin in book indices with an alphabetical index of titles as in *Retrospective Index* or *Film Review Index*. Following those steps would lead to a search through the more subject-oriented books, such as *The Film Index: a Bibliography*. Depending on the research topic, these steps could easily go the other way. A search on 'crime-detective films' would have produced very different results proving it is important to have an idea of what type of information you are looking for before starting an in depth search.

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