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Comparing Reference Tools: A Case Study for *Seven Chances* and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea

This case study reviews reference tools and search strategies for two different items: *Seven chances* (Dir. Buster Keaton, 1925), and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea (1928-1996), the most influential director of Cuban cinema. My original approach was to research two related items either because of nationality, continuation of topic, or any other similarity, drawing from film studies. However, the diverse scope and the publication year of the assigned tools led me to change the objects of study. Keaton's *Seven* has merited less critical attention and scholarship than other films by the same director. Whereas Tomás Gutiérrez Alea occupies an enigmatic place in the history of Cuban cinema because of the political ambiguity of his films, either in favor or against the Cuban Revolution political project.

As a general procedure, I intended to follow the alphabetical list from the instructions. However the mobility of electronic databases determined a division of the task, leading me to research in situ at Bobst Library, and consulting the electronic sources at home. As a result, in the first part of the report, I review the books; in the second part, I focus on the databases. At Bobst Library, I skimmed the books in order to become familiar with their displays and organization. I searched the index to ensure that they would provide information on my subject selections. Although the instructions for this assignment suggest searching for two different items, it was difficult to keep from checking both director and films at the same time [*Seven*

Chances and “Keaton, Buster” and “Gutiérrez Alea, Tomás” and “*Memorias del subdesarrollo*”¹], particularly when information was scant.

As instructed, I looked for a “how to use this book” section, clearly drafted in Linda Batty’s *Retrospective index to film periodicals 1930-1971*. There are no occurrences of *Seven chances* in her book; information on Keaton is found in the “Subject” and “Book Review and Citations” sections. Indeed, the criteria for the selection of the two first categories are not clear, notwithstanding Batty’s introduction. Citations for Gutiérrez Alea are provided in “Film Subjects” and further information is found under *Memorias del subdesarrollo*. The director is listed as “Alea”; indeed, Gutiérrez is not his middle name but his family name. Unless the user is familiar with the Spanish last name system, the entry might be dismissed due to its misplacement.

As the title states, Hanson and Hanson’s (1986-1987) book is a “film review index”. In the introduction, the authors offer a rationale for choice of materials and list a series of limitations to the *modus operandi* to what they call a “film-centered approach” (viii). The specific entry on *Seven chances* provides 12 sources. Due to its “film index” nature, there is no information on Gutiérrez Alea; it does contain a generous listing of 40 journal entries on *Memories of the underdevelopment*. In either case, the listing of film reviews is neat and succinct. The simplified information would make it easy to locate materials, whether they are currently kept in microfilm, physical copies or digitized.

MacCann’s *The New Film Index: A Bibliography of Magazine Articles in English, 1930-1970* (1975) is a confusing reference book. A “how to use this book” section could serve its purposes better. In the “To the reader” section, the author weaves explanations on the origin of

¹ In the case of Gutiérrez Alea, my search often digressed to his 1968 quintessential *Memorias del subdesarrollo* (*Memories of Underdevelopment*), a film that inscribed the director into international criticism, and to date, still considered the most important Latin American film of all times.

his project, description of his work team, and organization of the book along with anecdotes on the process of compilation. The users are invited “to approach it in some degree as collaborators” (xi). Although apparently thorough in coverage, the non-alphabetical cataloguing and mystifying arrangement of categories turns discouraging to the user.

The Museum of Modern Art *Film Index: A Bibliography* (1966) is an ambitious catalogue that stands as a token of the challenges to organize film literature. It also previews the problems of including scholarship in languages other than English, a more daunting issue in our current globalized world. The book, hence, is rather centered in England and the United States [here referred as “America” (xix)], with high emphasis on New York-based materials. As the warning on the digests promises, there is no appraisal of value and the book is comprised of descriptive annotations (xix). There is no specific reference to *Seven chances* in the “Individual Keaton Films” selection on page 382, neither his films are listed in “The American Film Section”. The reference is found in “Actors” which in turn refers the user to “Comedy.” Even if the digests are guiding, the arrangement of the entries makes the search confusing and time consuming. There is no mention to Gutiérrez Alea, which makes sense since the film that inscribes him as an international director is from 1968.²

Salem’s *A Guide to Critical Reviews, Part IV: the screenplay* (1971) is a very concise tool with very succinct and punctual explanations on how to navigate its pages. The author makes a clear point on covered materials, selection criteria, and user’s role. Since it spans a period of publications from 1963 to 1980, there are no entries on *Seven chances*. There are no

² There is an entry in the section “Film as Art” under the subject “Cuba” (76). It reiterates the handicap to equate Cuba to the “Spanish peninsula”, and the digest further refers the user to the “The Foreign film: Spain” section. This is symptomatic of an early era on Hispanic Studies when attention to Latin American was hardly devoted. The creation of Latin American Studies Departments in US universities positively marked a shift in the 1970s.

specific entries on Gutiérrez Alea but there are 11 occurrences for *Memorias del Subdesarrollo*, presented in a very accessible way.

Schuster's *Motion Picture Performers: a Bibliography of Magazine and Periodical Articles, 1960-1969. (1971) & Supplement. (1970-74)* is as simple in its presentation as Salem's tool, with easy instructions for the user. Schuster's contribution is on performers so it made sense to look for Keaton, a performer and director, and to dismiss Gutiérrez Alea who is merely a director. There are no specific references to *Seven chances*. The organization of the results under "Keaton" by year of publication—rather than by alphabetical order—may serve the purposes of someone who is particularly invested in chronological research and /or reception of Keaton's work across the times.

As a library user who worked extensively with printed databases before moving to electronic databases, this comparison exercise reminded me of the joys of the electronic world that many researchers take for granted nowadays. Not my first experience with the *FIAF International Index to Film Periodicals*, one can never dismiss the need to narrow the search as much as possible by taking advantage of the different boxes in the menu, and feeding the system with as much information as possible. A search for "*Seven chances*" vs. "Seven chances Buster Keaton" is tremendously different in quantity [1294 hits/421 results vs. 1187 hits/ 39 results, "TV related articles", omitted]. This sophisticated tool from the FIAF is complete and well kept. The often inclusion of the PDF version of the articles makes it a delight to visit. A search for "Gutiérrez Alea, Tomás" is more daunting since a quick scroll down of the results makes it clear that there is a combination of specific records on the director as well as comparisons or similar cross-references. The researcher's background would play a central role and might discourage cinema studies neophytes.

For time purposes, I deliberately segregated the AFI section from the *Film Index International* from the British Film Institute. This database offers very complete technical information on films and crews. The scholarship digests remind of user-friendly methodology such as Salem and Schuster's. The "Person" search screen facilitated the location of records for my subject "Gutiérrez Alea, Tomás" although it invariably refers the user to the list of films. Finally, the Ebsco Database "Film & Television Literature Index" listed in Cinema Studies/NYU remains a mystery to me. In my experience, this database offers an amazing array of possible combinations but the best results derive from keeping the search simple. In the case of *Seven chances*, my results were negative when feeding information such as "Subject", and very detailed hints in the "Search Option" section. Instead, by simply typing "Seven chances" and "Buster Keaton" and clicking on "find all my searches terms", the system directed me to five useful and recent entries. Likewise, the best possible search for Gutiérrez Alea results from not checking any box and not making any refinement selection.

In sum, the organization, functionality, and scope of each one of the physical tools seem to correspond to a kind of research in vogue at the times of production of each one of the resources, and in many cases to a search for the right tool (such is the case of the MoMA index). There is substantial difference with the way information is organized in electronic databases vs. printed materials. In my view, the availability of Web materials makes the research task less time consuming; its feasibility for continuous uploading of information facilitates consultation at different times. Yet for those of us training in Moving Image and Archive Preservation, precedent printed forms are treasuring deposits of knowledge. They offer a myriad of selection trends and data deployment that reflect philosophies on information sciences, editorial practices, and history of cinema studies as a discipline, needless to say priceless to our profession.