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**A Comparative Study of
Selected Print and Online Reference Works**

I selected Robert Mitchum and Lillian Gish as my subjects for this assignment. In the instances

when there was no information pertinent to them as individuals, I opted to focus my search

efforts on *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Night of the Hunter* (1955) instead as a means of

broadening my search results.

I began by ruling out the Museum of Modern Art's *The Film Index: A Bibliography* as a

useful reference tool for this project. I did this because, although the book contains a wealth of

information, it is organized thematically and thus the organization of information means that it is

more useful for broader, conceptual topics rather than for smaller, more microscopic ones such

as research about an individual or a particular film.

M. Schuster's *Motion Picture Performers*, however, proved to be an excellent reference

tool for seeking information about individual performers. It is arranged alphabetically and

consists entirely of citations referring to individuals. Lillian Gish had 24 citations while Robert

Mitchum had 26, the majority of which in both cases referred to film publications like Sight and

Sound or Photoplay.

Similar to Schuster's text is the "Biography" section of R. D. MacCann and E.S. Perry's

The New Film Index, which also provides a list of citations that refer to articles about individuals.

The scope of information is much narrower in MacCann and Perry's text, however, yielding only

one citation for Robert Mitchum and five for Lillian Gish. Although they are fewer in number,

the benefit to the way that MacCann and Perry chose to organize this information is that each of these citations are accompanied by a one-sentence summary of the material it references, which can provide readers with some guidance as to deducing which citations might yield the most information.

The New Film Index also has a section "Extended Analysis of Single Films" section, which is a sub-section of the "Film Theory and Criticism." In order to flesh out my search I also looked up *Birth of a Nation*, starring Lillian Gish, and *Night of the Hunter*, starring Robert Mitchum. This yielded two journal articles that analyzed the former and only one journal article that analyzed the latter.

However, there are several additional reference tools on our list for gathering material about a single film. Patricia and Stephen Hanson's *Film Review Index*, published in two volumes, contains 63 citations for *Birth of a Nation* and 29 listings for *Night of the Hunter*. It is worth noting, however, that while the majority of the citations for *Birth of a Nation* are taken from trade publications, the majority of the citations for *Night of the Hunter* are from more populist publications, such as Time, Newsweek, Life, and the Saturday Review.

In addition to the *Film Review Index*, J.M. Salem's *A Guide to Critical Reviews, Part IV: The Screenplay* is also an appropriate reference tool for gathering citations on articles about individual films, although I found it to be inconsistent: In the original *A Guide to Critical Reviews, Part IV: The Screenplay*, *Birth of a Nation* was not listed at all, while *Night of the Hunter* was listed 15 times, with 14 of the 15 listings from 1955. However, in *A Guide to Critical Reviews, Part IV: The Screenplay Supplement One: 1963-1980*, published in 1982, *Birth of a Nation* has two entries while *Night of the Hunter* is not listed at all.

The sheer breadth and scope of the information contained within the electronic databases on our list impressed me. Occasionally, the large quantity of information proved to be a barrier to using the electronic databases. For example, searching for "Robert Mitchum" in the *FIAF International Index to Film Periodicals* database yields 3174 hits in 572 results, while a search for "Lillian Gish" turned up 2301 hits in 472 results. It is quickly apparent that many of these results will not be immediately relevant to the subject at hand, but have turned up as hits nevertheless. In working with the *International Index to Film Periodicals*, the challenge lies in employing Boolean logic to narrow your search in such a way that only the search results that are most directly relevant to your subject comes up.

The same is true for the *Film & Television Literature Index*. There is a lot of overlap between the two databases, although the *Film & Television Literature Index* is slightly smaller in scope than the *International Index to Film Periodicals*. The principal difference between the two databases is that the *International Index to Film Periodicals* contains a large quantity of foreign language film journals. Many of the other electronic databases do not contain titles like Positif and L'Art du Cinema, and they can be useful resources.

Given my choice of subjects, the database that I found to be most helpful for this assignment was *Film Index International*. The film records are incredibly useful, and provide the vital statistics of every film (the year of release, director, production company, country, synopsis, cast, run-time, etc.) in addition to dozens of references to articles about the film. What makes this database the most user-friendly reference tool by far, however, is the fact that all of the information contained within it is hyperlinked to related records. For instance, if you search for "*Night of the Hunter*," you get a record for the film that includes a list of cast members, including Robert Mitchum. His name is highlighted to indicate that there is a record for him, and

when you click on his name you are taken to a record that includes all of his vital statistics (alternate names, dates of birth and death, nationality, etc.) and provides, in addition, a long list of films that he has played in, each of which are hyperlinked to their own film record in turn.

The greatest benefit of the *Film Index International* database is the ease with which one can browse and consume information. If you were to browse in an equivalent fashion with reference texts, you would need nearly all of the texts mentioned above to be open and bookmarked on your desk simultaneously, which is cumbersome, time-consuming, and impractical. There are enormous benefits to having information organized in such an easily accessible format.

However, despite its easily accessible information and extensive reference sections, the *Film Index International* database is far from complete. Upon closer inspection, it appears that none of the databases that I researched for this project is "definitive" in and of itself. Despite a high degree of overlap between the articles listed in the reference texts and those listed in the reference sections of the *Film Index International*, for instance, there is at least one distinct reference in every single source that was not contained in any other. This is a significant fact that should not be overlooked, and tells us that no single source contains a complete set of information; each source compliments the others. When looked at in combination with one another the result is a data set that is, albeit not necessarily "definitive," a more complete set of information than any source—print or online—taken individually.

In conclusion, although the user interface of online databases like *Film Index International* may be preferable to a researcher due their ease of use, there is equally valuable information to be found in print sources. Despite being unwieldy and cumbersome, print resources are still a valuable source of information that should not be overlooked.

Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that the online databases are simply better suited to certain kinds of information gathering. For instance, given the relative ease with which an online database may be updated, it seems that, overall, online resources are better positioned to provide a comprehensive, up-to-date list of film titles and references, especially if the subject is still living and their *oeuvre* still expanding. Whereas a digital resource like the *Film Index International* is modifiable, print reference tools are fixed entities once they have been published, and may be amended or updated only by publishing a supplement or other corollary material.

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