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Access to Moving Image Collections

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Reference Tools Analysis: Researching Sessue Hayakawa and *Pimpernel Smith*

For the assignment to compare reference tools, I decided to research one personage and one film. The personage was Sessue Hayakawa, a silent film star who left the United States to act in a number of foreign films after the arrival of the sound era, then returned to Hollywood and revitalized his career in the 1950's, eventually being nominated for an Academy Award. The scope of Hayakawa's career, and his importance as a record-breaking Asian-American film star, led me to believe that his name would turn up a healthy number of results across the variety of indices we were investigating. The film – a slightly more obscure selection – was *Pimpernel Smith*, a British anti-Nazi propaganda thriller starring Leslie Howard, and released in the United States as *Mister V*. Researching a foreign film that was released under an alternate title seemed like it might provide an interesting challenge, and I was curious to see how the indices would deal with the organizational conundrum.

I began with the print indices, looking first at *Motion picture performers: a bibliography of magazine and periodical articles, 1960-1969* and its *Supplement*. Obviously, this was a source that wouldn't turn any reference to my film choice, being focused on performers, but it provided an encouraging wealth of information on Hayakawa, which I was easily able to find simply by identifying the 'H' section and looking up his last name. The initial volume listed a number of articles focused on his role as Japanese film star and movie villain. The supplement, which, according to the introduction, provided a greater scope of magazines included as well as updating the references up to 1974, listed a full range of articles and personal interviews, as well as some biographical retrospectives written on the occasion of his death, which occurred in between the publishing of the first and second volumes.

I then moved onto the *Film review index (Volume 1)*, which explains that it is “an attempt to fill

the gap left by traditional indexes and to provide a retrospective bibliography of articles about specific films” (Hanson, vi). Since the source focuses on specific films and does not allow any ability to search by performer, I gave up on the expectation of finding reviews featuring discussion of Sessue Hayakawa, but I expected to provide a healthy amount of information on *Pimpernel Smith*. However, I found when I looked up this title alphabetically that it redirected me to the alternate title, *Mister V*; here I did find the listing of the contemporary interviews that I had expected.

*A guide to critical reviews, part IV: the screenplay* proved itself quite similar in functionality to the *Film review index*, at least when it came to looking up my subjects. This source also focused explicitly on reviews of full-length movies, and went so far as to specify that “no attempt has been made to include articles from the scholarly journals” (Salem, v). Once again, there was no way to search by performer, and once again, all information for Leslie Howard’s film was listed under *Mister V*. In this case, there was no listing for *Pimpernel Smith*, not even a cross-reference, which meant that researchers looking under the British title and unaware of the American renaming might be out of luck. Throughout the rest of my research, I found it interesting to track which sources privileged the U.S. release title over the original British title. I suspect that in these cases the preference has to do with the focus on contemporary-to-the-film reviews from the United States, rather than retrospective research from around the globe; all of the sources that focused on film periodicals turned up far more results for *Pimpernel Smith* than for *Mister V*.

I didn't know that at the time, though, so when the *Retrospective index to film periodicals 1930-1971* turned up a blank on *Pimpernel Smith*, I conscientiously went on to search for *Mister V*. Somewhat to my surprise, I couldn't find any information under either title despite the fact that I was dutifully looking under “Individual Films,” as explained in the “How to Use This Book” section at the front of the volume. I did find several entries for Sessue Hayakawa, however, by looking under “Subjects”; the source also provided helpful content notes for the articles, which all seemed to come from after the 1960's with no reference to Mr. Hayakawa's career in silent or foreign films. It seems

that the *Retrospective index* is a valuable source if your subject happens to be well-known, but not necessarily inclusive of more obscure subject matter.

The last two print sources – *The film index: a bibliography* and *The new film index: a bibliography of magazine articles in English, 1930-1970* – turned out to be the least intuitive to use. The three volumes of *The film index* are complex even in and of themselves; while the first volume was compiled during the 1930's under the auspices of the WPA, the subsequent volumes were not completed until several decades later and with, apparently, a certain sense of nostalgia for a project that was by then thirty years old and existed mostly on yellowing notecards. All the same, the first volume did provide a relatively traditional search option with the index in the back of the book, which allowed me to look up references to Sessue Hayakawa and discover a well-annotated reference to an interview with him, an interview with the director who discovered him, and several film reviews. In the subsequent volumes, I found nothing. I didn't bother searching for information on *Pimpernel Smith*, since all the research was completed before *Pimpernel Smith* was produced and it seemed unlikely that they had a time traveler on staff.

*The new film index*, while claiming to be designed as an easy and updated companion to *The film index*, I found significantly more challenging. There seemed to be no easy way to search or cross-reference by subject; I couldn't even find a listing in the front of the book for the specific topics by which they were arranging their entries. Using the index in the back, I was able to hunt down an entry for Sessue Hayakawa – but only an article that he had, in fact, written himself, since the index only seemed to reference article authors. There was no cross-indexing to any other place he might have been mentioned. If I had had no other sources at my disposal, I might have then proceeded to find all of the topics under which he might conceivably fall and search down every entry for those topics, but given the wealth of other options, it did not seem like the most productive use of time. As for finding information on *Pimpernel Smith*, the task resembled the proverbial search for the needle in the haystack.

At this point, rather grateful that I had been born into the Internet age and did not have to rely on *The new film index* for information, I turned my attention to the online sources, beginning with the *FIAF international index for film periodicals*. FIAF provides several fields to search under, including ‘Keyword,’ ‘Person,’ and ‘Film/TV Title.’ I began by searching under the keyword “Sessue Hayakawa,” which turned up 304 hits in 82 results – most of them general discussions of Asians and Asian-Americans in cinema, topics relevant to Hayakawa’s life and career but not necessarily specific to the man himself. Plugging Hayakawa’s name into the ‘Person’ field, on the other hand, provided 8 very specific results, generally retrospectives on Hayakawa’s career written after his death. It seems that using the ‘Person’ field would be a good place to start research on an individual, with the option to broaden out into the ‘Keyword’ for a wider range of results. Searching for *Pimpernel Smith* under ‘Keyword,’ on the other hand, provided 82 hits in 23 results, most of them tangentially related to the film but some quite relevant, while searching under “Film/TV Title” turned up only one, not including a relevant review that the broader search provided. I was surprised how unhelpful this was, especially given the information stated in the search engine that “these fields are particularly useful to search for reviews or articles about a specific film” (FIAF). Searching under *Mister V* in both fields turned up information only about a different French film of the same name, with no links back to *Pimpernel Smith*.

The *Film and television literature index with full text* proved itself to be more helpful when it came to *Pimpernel Smith*. This index only allows for Boolean keyword searches, although in this case, since neither of my subjects turned up an unmanageable number of results, I did not feel the need to narrow my search. Searching under *Pimpernel Smith* provided me with three results that looked highly relevant from the titles, although none of them provided full-text or much description about the article itself besides the title, author and location. Still, this was a better showing than FIAF had managed. Searching for “Sessue Hayakawa” turned up a large number of full-text sources, including several reviews of the book-length study of Hayakawa’s career *Sessue Hayakawa: Silent Cinema and*

*Transnational Stardom*. I was pleased to see this for a number of reasons: one, the book would be a very valuable source for any researcher, and the other indices had turned up no sign of it; two, on a more personal note, this was the book that got me interested in Hayakawa to begin with. In general, it's useful to know that the *Film and television literature index* is likely to contain reviews and information about book-length sources, as well as periodical references.

To conclude my investigation, I turned to the *Film index international*, and promptly decided that in the future, when researching films and film personages, I should probably go here first rather than last – while this source doesn't provide all the critical data offered by many of the others, it's a good place to start to turn up other searchable keywords about the material, since its purpose is explicitly to provide a listing of films with full credits. This meant that searching “Sessue Hayakawa” offered me 29 film titles that I could use to hunt down, for example, reviews discussing Hayakawa's films and performances in sources such as the *Film review index* and *A guide to critical reviews*. Searching either *Pimpernel Smith* or *Mister V*. brought up a listing of the actors in the film that I could have cross-referenced in *Motion picture performers*, as well as a wealth of reviews from the original release date.

Then again, if there's one thing I took away from this assignment, it's that almost every source has its own strengths and weaknesses in terms of functionality. Being able to play those strengths off each other to provide a variety of relevant results is one of the most important skills a researcher – or, of course, an archivist – can possess.