

# Sacrilege or Synthesis?

## An exploration of the philosophy of audiovisual archiving

*Ray Edmondson*

**Ray Edmondson** joined the National Library of Australia in 1968, where by 1978 he was overall head of the Film Section. When the National Film and Sound Archive was separated from the Library in 1984, he worked in setting up the new institution and became its Deputy Director (his current role) in 1986. The following year he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for his work in AV archiving.

He has been active in related organisations, such as the Australian Council of Government Film Libraries, Music Roll Australia, Australian Centenary of Cinema (in each of which he was foundation chair) and FIAF and IASA. He writes widely on AV archiving topics for the professional and popular media, here and overseas. Ray is aged fifty-two and lives with his wife, Sue, and children David and Peter, in the Canberra suburb of Kambah. They share his interest in the AV media. He has degrees in arts and librarianship, and outside professional pursuits has a passionate interest in cartoon animation and comic strips.

*One of Australia's leading film archivists argues for the development of a new philosophy of 'archiving' and describes an international network of efforts begun in 1994 to carry out this work. The case is built firstly by an examination of existing ideas from archival science, librarianship and museology and secondly by presenting definitions of three interconnected terms, 'AV media', 'AV Archives' and 'AV Archivist'. Underlying these terms is the challenging assertion that 'the archival profession has no copyright on the word "archive" – others employ it, and define it, as suits their needs . . .'. The extent to which one can thus speak of an emerging AV archiving professional and the impact of new technologies are also covered.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*The year: 1926*

*The place: Sydney Harbour*

*The time: The dead of night*

*Rocking slowly on the swell, the old hulk lies at anchor some distance from shore. It is a distance to be safe rather than sorry, for in its hold are piled thousands of reels of unwanted film: the flammable nitrate stock will make a spectacular blaze on the morrow, when the ship is towed outside Sydney Heads and put to the torch for a big scene in the epic film *For the Term of His Natural Life*.*

*From out of the seaward gloom a small boat draws alongside, and the oars are deftly stowed. Two men climb aboard the hulk. Quickly and quietly, working by moonlight, they search amongst the heaped rolls of film, piling their selections on the deck. Then, with ropes and bags, they lower their booty in batches to a companion in the boat. After a couple of hours, their small craft laden to the gunwales, they push off and make for land—a darkened part of the foreshore, where the plunder is deftly stowed in waiting vehicles. They vanish into the night.*

THIS APOCRYPHAL STORY of some collectors helping themselves from the rubbish bin of Sydney's film distributors is part of the mythology of audiovisual archiving. It may or may not be true, but is no stranger than many other such exploits whose veracity has been established. The gentlemen in question were engaged in theft—but their action ensured the survival of films in private collections which, maybe decades later, passed into the hands of institutional archives. Whether by intent or not, they probably performed a significant service for posterity.

### **First, some history...**

Professional film archiving, as we know it today, emerged from this half-light world soon after, in the 1930s. Around the globe, a film industry which had found its voice was destroying a vast inventory of silent films, now suddenly without commercial value and clogging up valuable storage space. Standing somewhere between the proprietorial forces of commerce, and traditional notions of cultural heritage which had not caught up with the twentieth-century media, film archiving had a vague aura of surreptitious illegitimacy—a flavour which, even today, it may not have entirely dispelled.

As the field developed, the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAPF)—today an organisation of some sixty-five members, headquartered in Brussels—began to define the organisational nature of film archives, to set operational standards for its members and to provide a coordinating focus for issues of shared concern. Later, as it was joined by other forums—such as

the International Association of Sound Archives (IASA) and the International Federation of Television Archives (FIAT)—the broader canvas of audiovisual (AV) archiving, as we understand it today, emerged. As they grew, organisations both within and outside such networks explored the breadth and byways of collecting and preserving the products of the screen, sound and broadcasting fields.

To a significant extent worldwide, the growth of AV archiving took place outside the structures of traditional collecting institutions, such as libraries, archives and museums. The term 'archive' adopted by many of these entities was less a statement of professional identity than a convenience term for a concept for which there was not—and still is not—a distinctive, standardised icon. For the same reason some, instead, adopted the epithet 'library' or 'museum' or made up words like 'phonotheque' or 'cinematheque'.

More recently, within the last decade or so, the evolution of image and sound technologies, and the changing cultural status of the AV media, has begun to entwine these historical strands. Today, there are more and more multiple media archives—ones which deal with the several forms of sound



*Lacey Percival, one of Australia's pioneer cinematographers, in the 1920s. The earliest Commonwealth Government cinematographers were classified, in effect, as surveyors—because they used tripods! It took a while for the bureaucracy to recognise cinematography in its own right. (Photo courtesy of the NFSA Documentation Collection.)*

recording, broadcast and moving image—and, among the international federations, increasing cooperation and a re-examining of roles and future directions.

While AV archiving is still in a pioneering phase in many countries, the field has grown and matured internationally, and the older institutions are now in the hands of second or third generation AV archivists. At the same time, the ‘traditional’ collecting institutions have adapted and the preservation and accessibility of moving images and recorded sound is increasingly part of their agendas.

### **A frame of reference**

Against this background, a growing number of individual practitioners around the world have felt the need to address what they see as a vacuum at the core of their work: the lack of a formal, coherent philosophy of AV archiving. For unlike archivists, librarians and museologists, the so called AV archivist, has no clear professional identity or frame of reference, nor defining qualifications. While the field can be mapped organisationally, more or less, and has shared characteristics, principles and skills, these have tended to be assumed rather than specified.

What began a few years ago as informal personal discussion has gathered impetus in the journals and conference agendas of the field. An expanding correspondence network known as AVAPIN (AudioVisual Archiving Philosophy Interest Network) is now active, circulating packages of reading material every few months. Last year, with the assistance of the National Film and Sound Archive and the Public Service Commission, the writer spent a period overseas developing, in concert with European colleagues, *A Philosophy of AV Archiving - Draft One* — a first, partial attempt to create a formal frame of reference. This formed the basis of a day-long debate at the IASA/FIAT conference in Bogensee, Germany in September—creating considerable input for work on Draft Two! (More information on this project, and AVAPIN, is at Appendix 1.)

To undertake such a task honestly means to have no preconceptions. It means avoiding the assumption that one can automatically transpose the precepts of other collecting fields into AV archiving. It requires documenting what *is actually the case*, rather than inventing or imposing theories or constructs: being descriptive rather than prescriptive. While the philosophy of AV archiving may have much in common with that of other collecting professions, *it should logically arise from the nature of the AV media, rather than by automatic analogy from those professions. It means describing the AV media in terms*

*of what it is, rather than what it is not*—and so making the paradigm shift from phrases such as ‘non-book’, ‘non-text’ or ‘special materials’.

## Fundamentals

To discuss AV archiving one needs to define a few terms in recognisable territory. Let me move, therefore, to some key concepts and consider several terms as defined in *A Philosophy of Audiovisual Archiving - Draft One*. (Let me caution that these are best read in their context, with the relevant footnotes, but I hope they are reasonably self-explanatory.) They embody the basic stance—now increasingly, though not universally, accepted—that the AV media are logically viewed as a single spectrum within which individual media, such as film or disc, and their related skills can be comprehended.

### *AV Media*

There have been many definitions and interpretations of this term which is variously seen to encompass (a) moving images, both film and electronic (b) audio-slide presentations (c) moving images and/or recorded sounds in various formats (d) still photographs and graphics (e) video games and/or CD ROM (f) anything projected on a screen (g) all of the above. AV archives need a definition which accords with working reality and positively asserts the character of AV media in their own right (and not as an aspect of something else).

So the following was advanced as a *professional* definition of ‘AV media’: AV media are works comprising images or sounds or both, whose

- recording and/or transmission, and usually whose perception and comprehension, requires the interpolation of a technological device;
- content is a reproduction of a visual and/or auditory entity, produced and perceived over a given amount of time; and whose
- purpose is the communication of that visual and auditory content, rather than the use of the technology purely to communicate textual or graphic information.

Sharp definition is impossible. But to illustrate, the definition *includes* conventional sound recordings, films, videos, radio and television programs, and oral histories. It *excludes* text per se, computer records of textual or graphic data, and microform. There remains a grey area, containing such things as

multimedia CD ROM, still photographs, video games, piano rolls and the tape-slide audiovisual on which opinions are divided.

### *AV Archives*

Before discussing this one, let us deal with some semantics!

The word 'archive', singular or plural, has both popular and professional connotations. The popular association is of a place where old, non-current materials of any kind are kept—probably covered in dust and cobwebs! Within the archival profession, the connotations are precise—as, for example, in the ICA's *Dictionary of Archival Terminology*.<sup>1</sup>

As historically embedded in the titles of 'FIAF, IASA and FIAT and their members, *neither* association is accurate. 'Film archive' or 'sound archive' or their variants usually connote an *organisation*: it has been a term of convenience rather than professional identification, and if the language had had a more distinct and succinct way of expressing the concept, it would have been used!

This semantic accident has, unfortunately, led to some unhelpful assumptions (and lively correspondence) about the nature of AV archives. The simple fact is that the archival profession has no copyright on the word 'archive'—others employ it, and define it, as suits their needs and are entitled to have their definition accepted on their own terms.

Hence:

An AV archive is an organisation or department of an organisation which is focused on collecting, managing, preserving and providing access to a collection of AV media and the AV heritage.

The key aspects are that an AV archive is an organisation—i.e. not a private individual or collection—and that collecting/managing/preserving/providing access to AV media is its focus, that is, not just one incidental activity among many.

In practice there are many types and emphases of AV archives. They may cover one or several media. Some may cover a wide range of content while others are highly focused or specialised in their subject interest.

### *AV Archivist*

While terms like 'film archivist', 'sound archivist' or 'AV archivist' are in common use in the field and its literature, there are traditionally no agreed

definitions of these terms: they are subjective and flexible—more a statement of personal identity or perception than a formal qualification. And unlike the other collecting professions, there is little in the way of formal training—and no internationally accepted qualification or accreditation—by which one may be professionally recognised as an AV archivist. In 1990, UNESCO published *Curriculum Development for the Training of Personnel in Moving Image and Recorded Sound Archives*<sup>2</sup> which sets out recommended training standards—but implementing them is something else!

Against this background, the definition was:

An AV archivist is a person occupied at a professional level with the management of an AV archive, the development or preservation of its collections, or the serving of its clientele.

### **A legitimate profession?**

Like many AV archivists over the years, I have encountered from my colleagues in the collecting professions the suggestion that AV archiving (as practised in this or that institution) is somehow illegitimate because it does not fully conform to their particular set of professional precepts. (See, for example, *Managing Records in Special Formats*, chapter thirteen of *Keeping Archives*.<sup>3</sup>)

In what I have written above I have obviously accepted the thesis that AV archiving is sufficiently distinctive as a field to be regarded as a profession in its own right. Nevertheless, such a thesis should arise from the evidence and not be taken as a starting assumption. Accordingly, one must consider the converse proposition: is AV archiving a subset of an existing profession (or professions) but can not quite manage to conform?

To test their perceptions, I have asked many colleagues in Australia and overseas to describe the discipline to which they believe they, and their work, belong. The responses, in roughly equal numbers, were (a) librarianship (b) archival science (c) museology (d) all of the above (e) none of the above. To some degree, the responses reflected the organisational nature of their employer and the background of the respondent; but there were also many who, despite their own professional training in these fields, were emphatic that their work was something other than librarianship, archiving or curating.

It is evident that existing professions can fill the identity vacuum to the satisfaction of most participants. The mixture of terminology, perception and assertion, therefore, suggested that AV archiving is in fact an emergent

profession, drawing what is useful from the existing collecting disciplines and adding a unique dimension of its own, drawn from the nature of the AV media and the experience of practitioners in dealing with it.

If this thesis is correct, pursuit of its consequences becomes vital for AV archives as institutions and its staff members as professional individuals. It impacts, of course, on questions of identity, career structure, training and accreditation. But it goes much further.

It raises the need to codify and make plain the defining principles and character of AV archiving in order to calibrate and validate current practice around the world. Until this happens, the vacuum will be filled by other things—principles-by-analogy, evolved custom, managerial intuition or pragmatism. While most of this will prove consistent with the frame of reference when it is codified, it will not until then be possible to demonstrate the intellectual coherence of the work that is now happening on an enlarging scale worldwide.

There are challenges and rewards inherent for all institutions in which AV archiving is practised. For organisations in which it is the core activity, it offers the possibilities and problems of an integrated frame of reference. For institutions in which it is one activity among several, it raises the question of accommodating another emerging profession—just as many collecting institutions have accommodated the profession of conservator, or a wide range of organisations accommodate the professions of librarian or archivist as internal specialisms.

### **The worldview**

'Profession' is a much misused word, but if asked to define it, I would suggest that in the eyes of the probable reader of this article, a profession would exhibit its own distinctive:

- code of ethics;
- principles and values;
- terminology and concepts;
- worldview or paradigm;
- a written codification of its philosophy;
- skills, methods, standards and procedures;
- forum—for example, its own literature and professional society; and
- training and accreditation standards.



In my view, AV archiving has, or is heading towards gaining, all of these, albeit with some significant qualification on the last two. (They are discussed at length in *A Philosophy of Audiovisual Archiving - Draft One*.) I can best illustrate by unpacking one of these topics—that of the ‘worldview’.

A defining feature of the various collecting professions is the particular paradigm or worldview which they bring to bear on the vast amount of material of potential interest to them, and which allows them to select, arrange and provide access to material in meaningful ways. They have much in common: the disciplines of collection building, the management and conservation of collection material, the provision of access to users are standard elements. There are cultural motivations and ethics which transcend the mechanical or utilitarian; there is the management of competing demands on slim resources. Differences arise in the way these functions are addressed.

Although influenced by tradition and history, these worldviews are not essentially determined by the physical format of the material: libraries, archives, museums and AV archives all collect paper-based formats, AV formats and computer-based formats, for instance. At the risk of gross oversimplification, some comparisons are suggested.

Libraries, traditionally repositories of the book (hence the name), the written and printed word, are also providers of information in all formats. They deal with material that is for the most part published and/or designed for dissemination, created with conscious intent to inform, persuade, move, entertain. The basic unit of the library collection is the discrete published book, periodical, program, recording, map, picture, video etc. Although a given book may be included in the collection of hundreds of different libraries, each collection is unique in character, reflecting its clientele, responsibilities and governing policies, and the quality of the library’s selection skills. The disciplines of cataloguing and bibliography provide for control and accessibility, significant information fields being the publisher, author, subjects, date and place of publication.

Archives deal largely with unpublished material—accumulated records of social or organisational activity which have been judged to be of continuing value. Rather than stand-alone works consciously created for publication, their interest is as the collective residue of activity. This material is selected, managed and accessed in context—the linkage to its creator, activity, or other related records are the prime considerations and collections are developed, managed and accessed in accordance with these concepts. For example, an archived correspondence file may be part of a particular series created by a particular government body in particular circumstances or at a particular

time. Knowing this and using the material in that context is essential to a full and proper understanding of it. Finding aids, not catalogues, provide the user entry point.

Museums may be said to deal in objects rather than documents or publications per se: collecting, researching, documenting, displaying. Conservation is a central skill and discipline, and the skills of public display under controlled conditions for educational purposes are a fundamental *raison d'être*. The use of AV technology for display purposes is increasingly characteristic.

AV archives, in total, embrace aspects of all three concepts. For example, they deal with both published and unpublished material but the distinction is not always obvious nor important; the concept of an 'original' (a film negative or master recording) is also meaningful. The skills of cataloguing and inventory control are equally essential. Because they deal with technological media, it is conceptually impossible to separate the technology from its product, so the disciplines of museology are relevant. The mechanics and avenues of access, whether to individuals or groups of various size, are manifold. There are other distinctions which arise from the nature of the media.

Equally, within this amalgam, there are aspects of the older professions which are not so relevant. For example, the archival science concepts of the record, original order and *respect des fonds* can be confining ones for the AV archive and not always relevant to its needs. The library science concepts of information and collection management have limitations. Access services can be very costly, so the ethic of free public access traditionally common in libraries and archives can be impractical.

The comparisons are instructive: a hypothetical example will illustrate. The same television program might legitimately find a place in all four types of institutions. Within a library, it may represent information, historical record or an intellectual or artistic creation. Within an archives, it may comprise part of the records of a particular organisation. Within a museum, it may be a displayable work of art. Each concept is legitimate, but the same work is viewed from different perspectives—from the worldview of the profession involved.

The AV archive is in a position to view the hypothetical program in its *own right and not as an aspect of something else*. It does not need to see it primarily as information, or historical record, or art, or organisational record. *It can see it as a television program which is all these things, and more, at the same time and organise itself around that fact.* The *character* of the AV media and its products

are the first reference point: just as, centuries ago, the character of the printed book, as a phenomenon, gave rise to libraries as we now know them.

To amplify this, one can consider—for example—how AV archives perceive paper materials in their collections such as periodicals, posters, photographs, scripts and the like. These items are mostly not perceived in their own right, but in that aspect which serves to amplify the value of the recordings, films or programs to which they relate. A film poster has value in an AV archive *because of the film to which it relates*. It may have quite a different value, as art, in an art gallery.

The extent to which this paradigm operates in practice varies according to the circumstances and choices of the AV archive. Autonomous AV archives—be they single or multiple media—which have independence and status comparable to major libraries, archives and museums are in the best position to exhibit it, for in such cases the AV media are seen to have the same cultural status as their older cousins. AV archives which are essentially departments of larger entities find an accommodation between this paradigm and the worldview of their parent institution. Obviously AV media, like other media, retain their whole character regardless of their organisational context. The question is how far that context can, or should, reflect that whole nature. (Professionals in libraries, archives and museums which are parts of larger organisations face comparable issues.)

## **Back to the future**

We live in exciting times—and also interesting ones! As AV archivists debate the propositions being advanced and test their veracity, so, I believe, do librarians, archivists, museologists and others need to look at what new technologies and world views are saying about their own paradigms and assumptions.

In an age of electronic data, to what extent do precepts based on the traditional paper record still hold good? What do these technological changes say about the very concept of a record? or about the principles of *respect des fonds* and original order?

In an age of databases, Internet, CD-ROM and the information superhighway, and of the amalgam of textual, graphic and audiovisual information which is creating a new kind of communication, what are the implications for traditional concepts like newspapers, books, periodicals, photographs—and indeed the emerging concepts of AV media discussed above?

And what of the collecting professions themselves? Having evolved their distinctive identities, is a changing world now bringing them back together again?

\* \* \* \* \*

## Appendix 1: AVAPIN and the Philosophy Project

The AudioVisual Archiving Philosophy Interest Network (AVAPIN), established in 1992, is an informal, international mail/fax network of individuals who share an interest in developing the philosophy of AV archiving. Although many have connections with IASA, FIAT or FIAF, others do not and it is open to all interested individuals. It is coordinated by the author with the support of the National Film and Sound Archive. A package containing a newsletter, address list and current background reading is distributed every few months.

Late in 1993, the opportunity arose, through the award of a Public Service Commission Senior Executive Fellowship, for the author to spend dedicated time in Europe in 1994 synthesising some of the debate on philosophical issues into a first draft document. He was joined in this by seven European AVAPIN members, comprising a 'Philosophy Working Group', who through discussion and reaction to draft text each contributed to the final result. The project began with sessions at the FIAF congress (Bologna, May) and concluded with discussion of the document—*A Philosophy of Audiovisual Archiving - Draft One*—at the IASA/FIAT conference (Bogensee, September 1994).

Developing a full-blown philosophy will be the work of many years—this is no more than a starting point.

## Endnotes

The author acknowledges the publication *Keeping Archives* (citation above) from which helpful information has been drawn for this article. The author's document *A Philosophy of Audiovisual Archiving - Draft One* has been drawn on as source material at several points.

1. Peter Walne (ed.), *Dictionary of Archival Terminology*, K. G. Saur, Munchen, 1988, p. 20.
2. PG1 - 90/WS/9. Paris, UNESCO, 1990.
3. J. Ellis (ed.), *Keeping Archives*, D. W. Thorpe for the Australian Society of Archivists, Port Melbourne, 1993.
4. Copies are available on request from the author at the  
National Film and Sound Archive  
GPO Box 2002, Canberra ACT 2601 Australia.  
Telephone: +61 6 209 3040  
Facsimile: +61 6 209 3165  
Internet: Ray\_Edmondson@nfsa.gov.au