

THE END OF FILM STOCK INDUSTRY: EMERGENCY FOR RESTORATION.

18/09/2013

The current disappearance of film stock implies the scarcity of expertise and related equipment. As the involved mutation is quicker than initially expected, it increases the pressure on heritage preservation. More than ever, it's urgent to preserve films. Vectracom offers an attractive solution for the restoration of film stock, to prepare it for high quality scanning, improve its retention and extend its lifespan.

THE FACT

Kodak got rid of its films division in 2012 and FUJI stopped manufacturing film stock in March 2013.

According to a recent study provided by IHS Screen Digest Cinema Intelligence, digital cinema will definitely replace traditional 35 mm cinema by the end of 2015. Hollywood studios will stop providing such 35mm films by the end of 2013. The increase of film cost will finish killing film stock industry in 2014. Reduction of cost of digital movie equipment speed-up and simplifies the transition.

Therefore, most of the film industry will quickly disappear in the next years with its businesses, equipment and know-how. This is already almost over.

A HERITAGE IN DANGER

Audio-visual heritage still largely lies on optical films (8mm, 16mm, 35 mm, etc.). Almost all institutions of the world have archives on such films. Furthermore, it's known that films age badly and degrade themselves: Chemical attacks, mechanical deformations and shrinkage, modification of elasticity, vinegar syndrome. All these phenomena are amplified by poor storage conditions. It is not uncommon to see film stocks in rusty cans.

PRESERVING THIS HERITAGE

Digitization implies dematerialization. So far, it seems to be the most efficient way to secure long term preservation of the audio-visual heritage that's on film stock. Indeed, when properly managed, the digital data is the best guarantee against ravages of time.

But the cost of digitization is not trivial and is a major obstacle for most digitization or backup projects. The disappearance of film stock will probably encourage preservation policies but lack of budget will remain a central problem.

THE REHABILITATION OF FILMS: AN ESSENTIAL STEP

The preparation of films for scanning covers cleaning and reparation steps and is called Mechanical Restoration (MR). It's mandatory before entering the scanner or telecine stage because it allows a faster transfer at a better cost and with a better quality.

- Many films are made of elements stuck together with scotch tapes that are losing efficiency and become very fragile. As the films become older, gluing is less reliable. Rehabilitation of scotch tapes is particularly required for News films as they are made of many short positive elements linked together with such scotch tapes.
- Some films are damaged, their perforations are in bad shape and their repair is required.
- If film rolls are small, films must be linked together to create a long media on a large reel in order to save a number of loading/unloading operations at the scanner/ telecine stage by the operator as they are time consuming and may damage short rolls.
- Prior to scanning, films should be cleaned as well in order to remove as much dust as possible and reduce scratches.
- And if films are not scanned immediately after preparation, they must be stored in sealed boxes allowing them to stay longer in good shape.

A MANUAL PROCESS

The preparation of films is not a simple or trivial operation. This is a real job requiring expertise and know-how. You don't become a film stock reparation specialist overnight.

It's a time consuming task using a lot of manpower. Indeed, it's quite expensive. It's therefore necessary to deal with specialists in order to guarantee performance and limit the overall cost of such operations.

STATE OF EMERGENCY

As film stock disappears, all associated skills are vanishing. Of course, there are still some companies that are able to restore such film stock today but it's obvious that their number and size will decrease very quickly, in the next years. And of course, the scarcity of film stock skilled companies implies an increase of the price of related services.

Restoration of a heritage film is a task whose urgency is due to the aging of the films, by the disappearance of knowledge and the increase of costs.

Anyone owning films today should, at a minimum, conduct an audit of their conservation conditions in order to assess the risks prior to action.

Media that are not restored continue to deteriorate. Those who are restored can expect a longer lifespan. They are also ready for a good quality scan.

Be careful as scanning a damaged film is an uncertain operation. It's costly and the outcome is really uncertain. And, as digital restoration, that's sometimes recommended after scanning, is uncertain as well as very expensive, it's better not to wait and scan films as quickly as possible. Timing is critical. The more time passes, the more the cost of restoration and scanning increases and more the expected result is poor.

RESTORING AT LOW COST

In order to create an attractive offer for Mechanical Restoration, Vectracom put in place an international team in 2008. Experts with many years of experience manage and control operations carried out by offshore operators. Since 2008 these operators also became experts. More than 20 work stations are full time used to assemble, repair and clean film stock. They refurbished already thousands of hours of media that were usually scanned later on to finish the job. Their global cost is very attractive for a delivery that we qualify of first class.