

TOO HOT FOR THE LIBRARY: ACCESS TO FILMS WITH SENSITIVE CONTENT

by

Olivia Fay Wong
Bachelor of Arts, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, 2013

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Abstract

Too Hot for the Library: Access to Films with Sensitive Content
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Olivia Wong
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Ryerson University

This thesis explores decisions on access to collections with sensitive content through a case study analysis of the library principles and archival practices applied to the films from the Youth Film Distribution Center (YFDC). These films are overseen by the Reserve Film and Video Collection at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center. The Reserve Film and Video Collection has been the principal circulating audiovisual department for The New York Public Library since the 1950s. The objective of this thesis is to explore processing decisions for films with sensitive content (e.g. films promoting negative stereotypes of their subjects or featuring violent or sexually explicit content). The thesis offers an historical overview of the Youth Film Distribution Center and outlines the processing decisions surrounding levels of access for the YFDC title *Seeing* (1972).

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Introduction

Introductory Statement

“It is a fantasy about the mental and physical masturbation of an over-exposed, over-stimulated urban teen-ager. The film is an adolescent nightmare dealing with sexual frustration, alienation, and racial ambiguities.”¹ This description of *Big City Blues* (1971), a fifteen-minute film by Andrew Lamy, can be found in the Youth Film Distribution Center (YFDC) catalogue among a striking variety of films by teenagers. The YFDC’s mission was to organize and promote youth-oriented workshops in New York City and to circulate the films created in these classes.² Youth who participated in these film workshops were given creative freedom to experiment with the medium, and as a result some of the films produced contain sensitive content such as nudity, drug use and promotion of negative racial stereotypes.

This thesis will address issues around archiving and accessing film collections that contain materials with sensitive content by using the YFDC as a case study. More specifically, this thesis will examine the principles guiding processing decisions for providing access to materials with sensitive content. The objective of the analysis is to highlight the deliberations archivists and librarians engage in when they determine how they can allow access to films with

¹ “Movies from Youth Film Distribution Center,” Youth Film Distribution Center, ca.1971

² Rodger Larson, “A Young Filmmaker’s Legacy: 1964-1974. The Film Recovery Project Phase I,” *National Endowment for the Arts* (1999): 1.

sensitive content. To this end, this thesis will first provide an historical overview of the YFDC collection, thus delineating the contextual boundaries of the case study under analysis here. Subsequently, this thesis will explore how the YFDC title *Seeing* (1972) should be processed for NYPL holdings since it contains controversial material and was not acquired through typical library acquisition strategies.

About the Collection

The Young Filmmaker's Foundation (YFF) was established in 1968 with the goal of enabling young people between eight and eighteen years of age to make films, providing them with the cameras and the resources necessary to explore the medium.³ The core function of the YFF was to organize workshops where young filmmakers collaborated on productions, shot, and edited their films. The YFF was part of a movement that gave rise to several youth media projects around New York City led by arts educator Rodger Larson. In 1963, Larson started teaching filmmaking to teenagers at the Mosholu-Montefiore Community Center in the Bronx and the 92nd Street YM-YWHA.⁴ By 1966, although workshops were still being conducted in various community organization venues across Manhattan, Larson found a permanent location for his experimental film school on New York City's Lower East Side. Operating out of a

³ Rodger Larson and Ellen Meade, *Young Filmmakers*, (New York: EP Dutton, 1974), 77.

⁴ *Ibid.*,13.

storefront at 11 Rivington Street, it was named, simply, Film Club.⁵ In 1968, Larson formalized the fully-funded youth film workshops and incorporated as Young Filmmaker's Foundation.⁶ The Youth Film Distribution Center (YFDC) was established in 1972 to create an official distribution network for the films that resulted from these community film workshops. The YFDC distributed films from a number of regional youth workshops, including its sister agency on the Lower East Side the Henry Street Settlement Movie Club, The Studio Museum in Harlem as well as a few out-of-state programs such as the Yellow Ball Workshop in Massachusetts and the Upward Bound Project in Connecticut.⁷

The films circulated widely, showing everywhere from neighborhood streets to the Museum of Modern Art. At least one program on WNET, the public television station for the New York metropolitan area, was dedicated to the works of YFF.⁸ The New York Public Library, seeking 16mm films to meet the demands of the emerging Young Adult demographic, first acquired prints directly from Larson in the late 1960s for programming and circulation purposes. From this point, the Library developed rewarding relationships with the youth center and its educators, continuing to purchase from and collaborate with the YFF team.⁹

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Rodger Larson "Film/Video Arts: Organizational Background" National Endowment for the Arts (1991): 46.

⁸ New York State Council on the Arts, "Transcript of the Whitney Video Conference" (NYSCA, April 1, 1974)

⁹ New York Public Library Press & Communications Office. "Press Release" (William Sloan Papers, New York

It was this relationship between YFDC and NYPL which prompted the latter institution to rescue the extant YFDC distribution library in the late 1990s.¹⁰ Today, the YFDC collection is overseen by the same department, now called the Reserve Film and Video Collection, located at The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. The prints initially acquired in the 1970s remain under NYPL's film circulation policy, which allows individuals and non-profit organizations to borrow materials for up to seven days with a valid library card. Their policy states that, "materials may be borrowed for private use only and may not be used for fundraising or other commercial purposes. Materials are not available for classroom use or school assemblies."¹¹

The additional materials from the 1999 acquisition, including distribution prints and pre-print elements, have yet to be fully incorporated in the library catalogue. The pre-print materials were catalogued under a group record in order to quickly process and store the elements in the cold-storage film vault at the Library's archival facility in New Jersey.¹² The remaining distribution prints have yet to be ingested into the library catalogue. Because these rescued prints

Public Library for the Performing Arts, 1972)

¹⁰ Rodger Larson, "A Young Filmmaker's Legacy: 1964-1974. The Film Recovery Project Phase I," *National Endowment for the Arts* (1999): 2.

¹¹ "Reserve Film and Video Collection," New York Public Library, accessed June 1, 2017, <https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/lpa/circulating-collections/reserve-film>

¹² "Young Filmmakers Foundation Collection [motion Picture]." New York Public Library Catalogue, accessed April 03, 2016.

were donated to the Library wholesale and not purchased through strategic acquisition, decisions will need to be made regarding how- and if- these materials will be processed.

Why does the collection merit our attention?

This case study highlights an important ethical dilemma, namely should access to materials with sensitive content be restrained even though restriction of access contradicts the central mission of public cultural institutions such as libraries, archives and museums? What makes the YFDC collection an ideal case study to explore this dilemma is that, in addition to its historical documentation of New York City in the 1960s and 1970s and uncensored cross-section of teen angst during one of the most tumultuous socio-economic times in the city's history, certain titles in the collection may be perceived as containing sensitive content. Nevertheless, the films were intended for distribution and were deemed valuable by the authority overseeing production and distribution despite, or possibly because of, their unfiltered and controversial topics. The dilemma remains how do we reconcile this value in a contemporary context with changed social norms and an open access library policy?

The YFDC prints originally purchased by NYPL in the 1960s and 1970s went through the Library's rigorous acquisition process which included a panel of librarians in a variety of specialties previewing the works and voting on which titles should be purchased. These titles are

still available to the public through the Reserve Film and Video Collection. This positions the remaining YFDC prints that have yet to be processed as either new accessions which will be cataloged and ingested into the NYPL circulating collection or as archival elements which are suppressed records unavailable to the general public, similar to how the pre-print materials have been processed for deep storage.¹³ Since these prints were not targeted acquisitions and were not selected through the acquisition process there are still questions concerning how the materials should be included in the collection.

The Reserve Film and Video Collection (RFVC) is a unique department, driven by branch library principles while also conducting archival work. The New York Public Library's systems is made up of both Branch Libraries, which serve the neighborhood children's programs, circulation materials, and provide a vital community hub while the Research Libraries serve as scholarly research centers.¹⁴ The policy guiding its Branch Libraries states "the Library believes it is essential in a free society for all citizens to have access to all library materials. Therefore, no restrictions are placed on what anyone may read, see, or hear in the collections of the Branch Libraries."¹⁵ The circulating material, including the 16mm film prints of the RFVC, is available

¹³ Although film elements are unavailable to the public, they were catalogued with the Young Filmmaker's Foundation group record that is public facing.

¹⁴ "About the New York Public Library," New York Public Library, accessed July 1, 2017
<https://www.nypl.org/help/about-nypl>

¹⁵ The New York Public Library, "The Materials Policy of the Branch Libraries of the New York Public Library;

to patrons and only in certain cases will the catalogue indicate “preview strongly recommended” if the content is deemed controversial for certain audiences. As a result, this case study can provide insight for cultural institutions since the Library, though applying archival best practices to conserve and preserve its holdings is mandated to acquire and make works available to the public without censorship. It is thus reasonable to advocate that access to this notable collection, now under the aegis of a department following branch library protocol, can be seen as an example for archival institutions that hold materials which also contain sensitive content.

Research Questions, Outline of the Thesis Structure and Limitations

The overarching question guiding this research is: What level of access should be allocated to film collections with sensitive content?¹⁶ And should films with sensitive content be processed as circulating library materials or as archival objects?¹⁷

This thesis is divided into three main chapters. The first chapter is a literature review that examines relevant texts to contextualize the study. The second chapter contains an overview of the history of the YFDC and highlights circulation trends around how the films from the

Policies for the Selection, Use and Withdrawal of all Library Materials,” Revised August 1999).

¹⁶ In this thesis, the term “access” is being defined as materials made available to researchers, professionals and the general public as on-site viewing, as circulating material, through public programming or an online platform.

¹⁷ In this context the definition of films with sensitive content will be limited to films that portray their subjects in a negative or compromising manner (e.g. films promoting negative stereotypes of their subjects or featuring violent or sexually explicit content). The terms controversial and sensitive are used interchangeably.

collection were presented to different audiences. This chapter is intended to clarify how to access films with sensitive content by focusing on the exhibition of YFDC films. The third and final chapter expands the preceding analysis and draws on primary sources to examine how a specific YDFC title with sensitive content, *Seeing*, has been circulated and distributed in order to guide forthcoming decisions on item-level processing.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

This literature review examines the three main topics related to how public cultural institutions determine access to films containing sensitive content. This section outlines a theoretical framework that grounds the analysis that follows. It is established in literature about the cultural and curatorial value of youth media, access in relation to copyright, and lastly, the ethical principles guiding decisions on access.

1.1 Cultural & Curatorial Value of Youth Media

Why is there a need to access youth-made media, and what is the historical and cultural value of films with sensitive content? The preservation and accessibility of non-theatrical films such as newsreels, documentaries, and experimental works has recently gathered public and academic interest through the discussion of orphan films, or works with non-locatable copyright

owners.¹⁸ In “Film Preservation 1993: Orphans and the Culture Wars” the author Janna Jones advocates for access to films outside of the commercial and theatrical productions produced by large studios since they enrich public discourse and film history.¹⁹ These works have historically been neglected by studio-led preservation initiatives. Jones argues that access to marginal films through footage licensing, where they are repurposed as stock footage in new productions, can help shape the public’s understanding of the past and build audience’s historical consciousness for future generations. Recent film archiving scholars strongly support the need for access and advocate for breaking down institutional barriers in order to fulfill the ultimate purpose of film preservation: to make the films available to the public.²⁰

However, in “Hand-Held Visions: The Impossible Possibilities of Community Media,” DeeDee Halleck considers how youth-made films must be shown in appropriate contexts that allow the audience to appreciate and understand them. Halleck explains that, “people bring so many preconceptions and expectation to any experience that they have to be nudged into an

¹⁸ Dan Streible, "The Role of Orphan Films in the 21st Century Archive," *Cinema Journal* 46, no. 3 (2007): 125, accessed November 5, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30130534>.

¹⁹ Janna Jones, “Film Preservation 1993: Orphans and the Culture Wars” in *The Past is a Moving Picture: Preserving the Twentieth Century on Film* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 92.

²⁰ see Caroline Frick, *Saving Cinema: the Politics of Preservation*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Eric J. Schwartz, and Matt Williams. "Access to Orphan Works: Copyright Law, Preservation, and Politics." (*Cinema Journal* 46, no. 2 2007)

alternate way of looking to be able to see something new.”²¹ She suggests that an anthropological point of view is required to have a greater appreciation of the works, such as having a personal interpretation of the films through program notes or offering an introduction from the filmmaker. This suggests that films made by young people must be viewed with contextualizing information in order for the audience to grasp the subtleties within the storyline. Halleck states, “recognizing the kind of fantasies, fears and humor that children have can make us more sensitive to their needs and hopefully allow us to see more clearly the problems and processes in the world we share with them.”²² She acknowledges the complex and personal themes in films made by children, and advocates for their exhibition to be taken with care and consideration.

In a similar vein, in the article "Vision, Authority, Context: Cornerstones of Curation and Programming,"²³ Mark Haslam advises curators and programmers to take a more active role when selecting films for public screenings, and advocates for events that engage with the audience. The author suggests including contextual information to demonstrate to the audience that the filmmakers have accurately represented and respected their subjects. This can be especially important for the case when the subject of the film addresses marginalized

²¹ DeeDee Halleck, *Hand-Held Visions: The Impossible Possibilities of Community Media*. New York, Fordham University Press, 2002), 58.

²² Ibid.

²³ Mark Haslam, "Vision, Authority, Context: Cornerstones of Curation and Programming," *The Moving Image* 4 (2004): 50, accessed January 5, 2017. doi: 10.1353/mov.2004.0010

communities or contains sensitive content.

Lastly, Lauren Tilton supports these views in her article “Preservation First? Re-Viewing Film Digitization.” She also feels that these films are relevant works- tools of resistance for youth having allowed them to depict their own communities and bring untold histories to the public.²⁴ Tilton’s article presents a middle ground: the possibilities of digitizing film for an online database that would allow youth-made films to remain discoverable by the public. Although the online platform presents a passive form of access which contradicts Halleck’s suggestions of audience engagement through programming, the digitized films will be supported by interviews with filmmakers and details on the production of community-made media in order to contextualize the works for the online viewers.²⁵ As demonstrated by the authors above, there is strong support to make marginal films publicly accessible in order to support the fundamental goal of film preservation as well as to include them in our knowledge and diverse representation of film history. The question remains, however, how to approach that exchange with public audiences.

²⁴ Lauren, Tilton, “Preservation First? Re-Viewing Film Digitization,” *Collections: A Journal For Museum and Archive Professionals* 12 no.4 (2016.): 25, accessed March 15, 2017. <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/rhetoric-faculty-publications/51/>

²⁵ “Participatory Media” Participatory Media Project, accessed December 10, 2017. <http://participatorymediaproject.org/>

1.2 Copyright & Access

Copyright is often stipulated as a prominent barrier in accessing archival material. In this context, the archivist's decision-making and subjectivity are disregarded. Contrary to this, the authors discussed in this section demonstrate how archivists are gatekeepers of materials who can impose their decisions on the accessibility of material.

In an extensive overview of access procedures in film archives titled "What is Access? IV. Formalities Relating to Access," Sabine Lenk defines access as the link between the user and the collection, which can be active (e.g. programming, loans or rentals) or passive depending on the institution's mandate.²⁶ The article also highlights reasons that archivist can put forward to limit accessibility. The physical condition can be noted as a considerable barrier, if either the material is deteriorating or the prints are embedded within preservation initiatives.²⁷ Commercial availability can also restrain access, since certain films are widely available online or through digital formats which can limit unnecessary handling of archival prints. Finally, restrictions are often imposed on unwanted research such as providing materials for commercial uses. As Lenk reveals, many important decision around access are left to the archivists, which appear to have much wider authority to determine when access is given and the type of research they want to

²⁶ Sabine Lenk, "What is Access? IV. Formalities Relating to Access" *Journal of Film Preservation* 55 (1997): 30.

²⁷ Ibid.

support.

Likewise, in “The Greatest Films Never Seen: The Film Archive and the Copyright Smokescreen” Claudy Op den Kamp outlines a main factor for restricting access is when the rights owner of the material cannot be located or is not claiming their ownership.²⁸ The latter factor emphasizes that institutions frequently house material for which they do not hold the intellectual property rights, thus archivists are often required to contact copyright owners in order to license materials for public screenings or when re-using the footage. This process can then put the onus of access on the copyright owner. Op den Kamp also observes that when the copyright owner cannot be located, archivists have the capacity to intervene in order to facilitate access and disregard legal restrictions. It is in such cases that access to archival objects becomes a process in which archivists play a very influential role. In this context, Op den Kamp argues, “the law does not consist of a set of rules that is applied mechanically; these rules need to be *activated*, and *someone* needs to decide to make material available.”²⁹ Based on these premises, she further argues that copyright can be seen as a barrier that protects archivists from having to provide access to materials.

In “Copyright Issues in the Selection of Archival Material for Internet Access” Jean

²⁸ Claudy Op den Kamp, “The Greatest Films Never Seen: The Film Archive and the Copyright Smokescreen” (unpublished manuscript, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. Forthcoming, December 2017) 147.

²⁹ Ibid.

Dryden emphasizes the copyright barriers affecting decisions for making archival materials available online and the issue of licensing archival holdings by examining copyright practices of online access in Canadian archival repositories.³⁰ Dryden concludes that archivists tend to avoid works with non-locatable owners, and rather concentrate their efforts on materials whose copyright has expired or materials whose owner is locatable. She notes that very few institutions receive takedown notices after putting materials online for access, and when that happens the reasons typically tend to be related to privacy rather than copyright concerns.

In an extension of her earlier research entitled “Risky Business? Issues in Licensing Copies of Archival Holdings,” Dryden suggests that repositories are misleading users by creating restrictive barriers for access and consequently compromising the core mission of archival access.³¹ Similar to Op den Kamp’ argument, Dryden concludes that archival repositories’ public image often misguides users by suggesting that they own the copyright of their materials, and gives a false sense of ownership of the material.

Nevertheless, in “Representation and Ethics in Moving Image Archives,” Nina Rao argues that unfettered access to films with sensitive content can be problematic in regard to how

³⁰ Jean Dryden, “Copyright Issues in the Selection of Archival Material for Internet Access.” *Archival Science* 8 (2009): 123, accessed January 5, 2017. doi: 10.1007/s10502-009-9084-3

³¹ Jean Dryden, “Risky Business? Issues in Licensing Copies of Archival Holdings” *Archivaria* 82 (2016): 136, accessed December 10, 2017. <http://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13583>

the individuals are represented.³² Copyright law does not cover the subject's moral rights, and although the subjects have ethical and moral stakes in the film they are not legally considered rights holders. Moral rights can be understood as protecting the reputation of the author and the integrity of the work by allowing the creator to dictate how the work can be shown and preventing the work from being altered. Unlike copyright, these rights cannot be licensed, will always belong to the author, and are meant to protect the eventual fate of the work. Rao suggests that it is up to the archivist to ethically decide how the use of the film will affect the moral rights of the individuals involved. That being said, Rao notes that archivists often misunderstand what exactly moral rights entail, and do not include a waiver of moral rights in acquisition agreements.³³ To conclude, the authors discussed in this section establish how copyright can affect public access to archival holdings; yet, how archivists choose to enforce both copyright and moral rights appears to be to a large extent a subjective decision.

1.3 Ethical Principles of Access

Aside from copyright, there are other factors that can influence archivists providing access to films with sensitive content. Two important factors in particular are ethical and

³² Nina Rao, "Representation and Ethics in Moving Image Archives," *The Moving Image* 10 no.2 (2010): 120, accessed January 12, 2017. muse.jhu.edu/article/415436.

³³ Ibid.

professional-conduct consideration.

In “Ethics and the Archival Profession: Introduction and Case Studies” Karen Benedict demonstrates that working professionals in cultural institutions are technically bound by ethical guidelines such as the Code of Ethics by the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA), and Federation Internationale des Archives du films (FIAF).³⁴ Yet, just like copyright, specific institutional practices and policies will affect how these guidelines are enforced. This author argues that when working with explicit material, access should be restricted during the lifetime of the all individuals involved in the production of the materials in order to protect the donor and anyone depicted in the materials. If there are restrictions set around access, these must remain equal for researchers and individuals personally tied to the materials. According to Benedict, cultural institutions have the ethical obligation to provide access to materials, respect the confidentiality of information that is not covered by privacy laws, and to protect and preserve the authenticity of their collections.³⁵

Rao’s analysis of FIAF’s code of ethics outlines the need for new ethical considerations for motion picture archives. While ethical considerations around access are briefly addressed in the FIAF code, it does not cover concerns for sensitive materials such as cultural representation

³⁴ Karen, Benedict. *Ethics and the Archival Profession: Introduction and Case Studies* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003), 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*,12.

and films that did not receive consent from their subjects.³⁶ In a similar vein, the individuals in the films should be considered when deciding to allow or restrict access to a film. The author notes that concept of ethical depiction of subjects can be drawn from notions around representations of marginalized groups or indigenous communities.

Rao also draws on examples of documentary participants consenting to being included in a film, pointing to the fact that it is impossible to know how the film or the participants' lives will evolve. In particular, she points out that when the participants are young, the integrity of the subjects and how they are depicted should not be considered a static and final representation. This example also underlines the point that archival footage can acquire a second life when repurposed in documentary films, which emphasize the ethical considerations for the archivists and the potential consequence for the individuals depicted in the film.

When questioning who should determine privacy restrictions, Rao's argument is similar to Benedict's, signifying that archives must respect the agreements imposed by donors. That being said, a donor might not be the author of the work, or not be aware of the explicit materials within their donation. Consequently, Rao emphasizes that: "archivist may have to advise donors who are unconcerned by, or unaware of, sensitive materials in the papers they are offering that may present problems. In such cases, it is the archivist's responsibility to review the papers with

³⁶ Nina Rao, "Representation and Ethics in Moving Image Archives," 119.

an eye to protecting the privacy of people who have not participated in the donation.”³⁷ As a result, archivists must use their judgment in order to achieve an ethical balance between donor agreements, researchers’ intentions and respecting the individuals depicted in the materials.

Rao and Benedict establish an archival landscape where professional codes of ethics are unregulated guidelines that do not have clear trajectories for enforcement. They suggest that the moral authority is put on archivists to decide what ethical boundaries will be imposed on access to the collection, especially if the donor is not fully aware of the content or if the material could have negative consequences for the individuals involved. Since the nature of sensitive content can also be quite subjective, they suggest restricting use for the lifetime of the individuals involved to avoid doing any harm.

To conclude, although academic literature has not directly covered the topic of decision-making around access to films with sensitive content, this literature review is meant to highlight the intersecting points of relevant established debates. It is worthwhile to note that all authors included in this review advocate for access to archival material since it is ultimately tied to public cultural institutions’ responsibility to their patrons.

A similar discussion is seen around the enforcement of moral rights and copyright, in which the responsibility is left to the archivist’s discretion. Dryden and Op den Kamp offer

³⁷ Ibid., 114.

complementary views on copyright, which reveal how archives promote a false sense of ownership of materials; in turn this furthers their argument that archivists often create their own boundaries due to their risk-averse tendencies around public access. Moving forward from this theoretical framing, the following section will use primary sources to focus on the archival practices and access principles of the YFDC distribution collection.

Chapter 2: The Youth Film Distribution Center

This chapter provides an overview of the history of the YFDC, reflecting on the factors that led to its incorporation in 1972 and the actions that led to the eventual placement of its film assets at NYPL. In addition, this chapter includes examples of how the YFDC films were made available to the public. This historical narrative and the distribution examples are meant to provide context regarding how the films were produced and initially shown to public audiences in order to provide a better understanding of how the history of the collection affects how it is archived and made accessible in cultural heritage institutions today.

2.1 Historical Overview of the Youth Film Distribution Center

In the early 1960s, Rodger Larson left his Madison Avenue career as an industrial designer to pursue his passion for arts education, specifically teaching media-making to young

people. He understood the importance of film as a medium of self-representation and expression for teenagers.³⁸ In 1969, Larson founded a youth-specific film organization, the Young Filmmaker's Foundation (YFF), with the aim of providing fully funded and professionally-instructed youth film workshops.³⁹ These workshops were free, with the mission of engaging youth who would otherwise not have the opportunity to learn filmmaking through industry standards.⁴⁰ While some YFF members eventually went on to develop careers in the film and television industries, the goal of YFF was not to provide a vocational training but to provide a space where new filmmakers could explore the medium as a form of self-expression.⁴¹ Larson believed that filmmaking could help with self-realization and allow youth to reach their full creative potential.⁴² Thus, instruction by adults was minimal and unintrusive.

These developments took place during the prime years of the so-called youth media movement of the late 1960s, a time when multiple sources of government funding allowed arts educators to initiate film workshops in low-income neighbourhoods.⁴³ In this favourable political and institutional context, the Youth Film Distribution Center (YFDC) was established as an extension of the YFF to create an official distribution channel for films produced in these

³⁸ Jonas Gerald, "The Talk of the Town: Film Club," 19.

³⁹ Rodger Larson, "A Young Filmmaker's Legacy: 1964-1974. The Film Recovery Project Phase I," 1.

⁴⁰ Larson, Rodger. Telephone interview by author, April 7 2017.

⁴¹ Rodger Larson, "A Young Filmmaker's Legacy: 1964-1974. The Film Recovery Project Phase I," 2.

⁴² Rodger Larson. "The Making of The Revenge – Teenagers Western Style" (*The Film Journal*: 1971)

⁴³ Nadine Covert and Fern McBride, "Symposium on Child-Made Films" (*Young Viewers* 1: 1977), 2.

workshops. The increase in youth-oriented film workshops in New York State and its environs allowed the YFDC to build an extensive catalogue of works for distribution. At its peak in 1974, the catalogue held one hundred and fifty titles, available for rent or purchase that had been produced entirely by regional youth workshops.⁴⁴ Prints were purchased by international institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, the Pacific Film Archives and the National Film Board of Canada.⁴⁵

Films made in the workshops were screened to audiences around New York City and through the Moviebus program.⁴⁶ The filmmakers would show their latest accomplishments to numerous audiences, often comprised of their peers. Titles such as *The Potheads* (1968), a cautionary tale of drug use, or *The Bridge* (1966), where a fourteen-year-old filmmaker prophetically advocates for cities to build bridges instead of walls, were shown at these screenings.⁴⁷ The films were received very positively during these events and “audible appreciation” could be heard from the audience.⁴⁸ Larson estimates that the YFDC, via the

⁴⁴Rodger Larson, “A Young Filmmaker’s Legacy: 1964-1974. The Film Recovery Project Phase I,” 4.

⁴⁵Rodger Larson “Film/Video Arts: Organizational Background” National Endowment for the Arts (1991): 46.

⁴⁶ The Moviebus initiative allowed young filmmakers to drive across the five boroughs of New York City in a modified Volkswagen Westfalia to screen their films to audiences in city parks. Jaime Barrios, *Film Club*, Youth Film Distribution Center, 1968, Digitized 16mm film.

⁴⁷ “Youth Film Distribution Center, “Movies from Youth Film Distribution Center,” c.1971

⁴⁸ Richard F. Shepard, “Youth Show their Films in Harlem” *The New York Times*, August 3, 1967, 29

Moviebus, presented to ten thousand kids during a single summer.⁴⁹

The YFDC catalogue was sent to cultural organizations in the hope that they would rent or purchase films by young filmmakers. Catalogues included the descriptions of available titles and the age of the filmmaker in addition to providing pre-selected programs as examples for public programs. For instance, one program titled “As Seen by Young Women” includes the films *Office Cinderella* (1971), described as, “[...] a young Black woman unexpectedly rebels against the oppressive manipulations of her (male) boss,” and *Aspirations* (1971), a work which “frankly explores the longings and terrors of becoming a woman in our society.”⁵⁰ The catalogue also highlights examples institutions that could show their films, including descriptions such as “Parent Teacher Associations: Particular films have provided insight into young people and their problems; or “Mental Health Organizations and Hospitals: Selected films have been used in staff training programs to aid further understanding of the imaginations, concerns and attitudes of adolescents”⁵¹ Immediately after these descriptions, the catalogue notes that YFDC is also able to provide a speaker for these events, most likely to lead discussions following the screenings.

In addition to listing available titles and grouping thematically relevant works, the second to last page of the distribution booklet notes that “viewing these films can be a highly subjective

⁴⁹ “Young Filmmakers Rediscovered”

⁵⁰ “Movies from Youth Film Distribution Center”

⁵¹ Ibid.

experience for a group. The dynamic between the filmmaker, the screen and the audience can provide a fine catalyst for free and open discussion.”⁵² This notice acts as important guide for those wishing to employ YFDC works in their public programs. Not simply selling or renting titles as isolated and detached products, Larson and company are delineating the works as educational materials.

Some users heeded this advice. In April 1973, Columbia University held a seminar about the YFDC. Titled “Young Filmmakers - Urban Expressionism,” the program included an introduction of the filmmakers by Rodger Larson, followed by a screening and a discussion with six of the young filmmakers. The short program notes explain that the conversation following the films would focus on the topic of urban expressionism through the lens of youth utilizing cameras.⁵³ This format of active engagement in screenings was also favoured by NYPL programming. In 1969, the Noon Film Program series at the Donnell Library hosted a program on “Filmmakers and Filmmaking” featuring the film *The End* (1968), by YFF workshop participant Alfonso Sanchez.⁵⁴ The program described the film as: “the sounds and music of today are background to this mad-cap view of today’s ‘scene’ involving a phantasy in which pot

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³“Young Filmmakers – Urban Expressionism,”Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture and Planning, April 19, 1973, 1.

⁵⁴ “Part of Ten Noon Hour Programs. Donnell Library Center.” January 9, 1969. William Sloan Papers, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

is legalized. Made by teenager Alfonso Sanchez with Rodger Larson's University Settlement group." This description follows YFDC guidelines of providing contextual and production information in order to nudge the audience into thinking beyond what is shown on screen. This screening can also demonstrate why Larson and NYPL had such a beneficial and long-lasting relationship. Film librarianship philosophies favor using film screenings as a catalyst for broader discussions with audience members, echoing the YFDC catalogue guidelines on programming youth-made films.

Alternatively, some programmers neglected to incorporate information on the young filmmaker and the context of the production. The Exchange Theater in New York City's West Village held a dance-oriented program titled "Who is Seamus Murphy and Why Is He Doing These Awful Things" and screened the YFDC title *Seeing* (1972) by Felix Limardo.⁵⁵ An article in *The Village Voice* describes the film as:

"*Seeing*, a color film by Felix Limardo and Seamus Murphy, is preoccupied with violence and horror. The camera cuts restlessly from a man lying inertly, his bloodied head resting between a woman's bloody thighs; to scenes of bored people arriving at a party; to people with blood pouring from their mouths,

⁵⁵ Don McDonagh, "Incense and Wails in Dance by Murphy" *The New York Times*, November 9, 1972, 58.

screaming in silent pain or ecstasy; to terror-stricken lovers. We never see the cause of the fear or blood, only the fact.”⁵⁶

This screening presented three titles by Murphy and Limardo, intermixing films with dance performances and light shows. The article describes Murphy as a sensual Satanist, and the films in this program match this representation; one film, *Seeing*, opens with a choreographed dance around a semi-nude teenager lying on her back with blood around her thighs. This event, widely different from the previously discussed screenings, demonstrates how dramatically distinct the YFDC film can be, and correspondingly, how they can be presented differently to various audiences. By omitting to present *Seeing* alongside other YFDC or youth-made works, the film had been taken completely out of context and viewed as an over-sexualized dream, something that is problematic outside of a program which recognizes and identifies for the audience the sexual and exploratory nature of teenagers. This screening validates that while the YFDC catalogue advocates for employing the films to create open dialogue and educational engagement with audiences, the organization could not mediate how a film was used and what contextual information is given at the event.

Soon after these events, the national decline of public arts funding led the YFDC to close

⁵⁶ Robert J. Pierce, “He is doing these awful things because...” *The Village Voice*. March 15, 1973, 34.

permanently in 1975. The entire collection of original prints and negatives was shipped to a storage facility in New Jersey, eventually coming under the aegis of Film Video Arts (FVA), the successor to the Young Filmmaker's Foundation.⁵⁷ In 1999, FVA Executive Director Eileen Newman contacted the Donnell Media Center of The New York Public Library to begin the process of transferring ownership of the extant YFDC materials.⁵⁸ Renamed the Donnell Media Center in the late 1970s and then Reserve Film and Video Collection in 2008, the department has maintained a relationship with Larson since first hearing of his work with young people in the 1960s.⁵⁹

The Donnell Media Center's acquisition of YFDC film elements coincided with a preservation initiative and funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York allowed the department to create new 16mm release prints of a number of YFDC titles. The newly-generated prints, along with those original YFDC prints purchased in the 1960s and 1970s, circulate for branch and public programming and are available to individual patrons for viewing in the Film Study Room at the Library for the Performing Arts or, in some cases, may be checked out with a library card for home use. Notable public events include the "Young Filmmakers Rediscovered"

⁵⁷ Ibid. 48.

⁵⁸ Rodger Larson, "A Young Filmmaker's Legacy: 1964-1974. The Film Recovery Project Phase I," 4.

⁵⁹ The Donnell Media Center was also known as The Film Library

screening at the 2005 Tribeca Film Festival⁶⁰ and the Punto de Vista film festival in Spain in 2011.⁶¹ Since the initial Carnegie-funded project in 2000, the National Film Preservation Foundation (NFPF) has funded the preservation of several more YFDC titles at NYPL. Recently preserved titles include the aforementioned *Aspirations* (1971) and *The Flop!* (ca. 1967), described in the YFDC catalog as “a film about a delinquent who falls to his death while resisting arrest.”⁶² The selection of works for preservation can be guided by what production elements are available but are often tied to how the film can be programmed and marketed to funding sources and the general public.

The following chapter hopes to highlight the Library’s forthcoming decisions on processing circulation material by using the controversial title *Seeing* as an example. The YFDC case study benefits from a level of access only available through library practices, thus the following examples will expand on how the Library’s workflows can provide insight in processing the remaining YFDC prints.

⁶⁰ “Young Filmmakers Rediscovered”

⁶¹ New York University Tisch School of the Arts “The 8th Orphan Film Symposium.” Last modified April 13, 2012. <http://www.nyu.edu/orphanfilm/orphans8/friday.php>

⁶² “Films Preserved Through the NFPF,” National Film Preservation Foundation, accessed March 17, 2017. <https://www.filmpreservation.org/preserved-films/films-preserved-through-the-nfpf#N>

Chapter 3: *Seeing*

The circulation overview of YFDC films in chapter two demonstrated how curatorial decisions and contextualization in public exhibitions can allow a greater understanding of youth-made narratives. Driven by public library principles, NYPL is in a unique position to allow access to their 16mm circulating collection, including certain YFDC titles. The portion of YFDC films that have yet to be processed are in an interesting situation, since upcoming decisions will guide how these titles will be incorporated within the collection.

The title *Seeing* is among the works that were never officially acquired for NYPL's 16mm film collection. The title is described in the YFDC catalogue as, "an artistic result of a young filmmaker's impressions from personal experiences resulting from the impact of TV, movies and city life."⁶³ The aforementioned *Village Voice* article gives a more accurate representation of the title by highlighting the puzzling violent and sexual content in *Seeing*. In particular, the film opens on a shot of a woman lying by a pool with blood on her thighs and ends on a vampire-esque cult ceremony where several naked women attack and bite a man while he is screaming for his life.

There are also concerns for the moral rights of the filmmaker, since Felix Limardo was only eighteen when he made *Seeing*. Further, there is no available information on the amateur

⁶³“Movies from Youth Film Distribution Center”

actors used the film, neither is there a clear explanation on Seamus Murphy's involvement as the choreographer of the film and a adult participating in the production.

Since its inauguration at the Donnell Library in 1958, the Library's 16mm film department has advocated for marginal voices and targeted acquisitions to highlight titles by independent and disenfranchised filmmakers. In the 1970 Film Library Annual Report to NYPL administration, Film Librarian William Sloan wrote "Indeed, I feel NYPL is a leader in using films in neighborhood libraries so that they may take an activist role in community life."⁶⁴ That being said, *Seeing* was not selected for inclusion in the NYPL film collection. In fact, according to the document "Films Recommended by Rodger Larson for Preservation", the title was noted as "Most important Film. Too hot for library." The overtly sexual content in *Seeing* is problematic and could not be interpreted as a valuable educational asset for NYPL, even in a non-curricular setting. NYPL and YFDC principles ask film users to provide production information and interpretations of the works in order for the audience to gain a greater understanding of youth-made media. That being said, NYPL actively rejected *Seeing* while it was in distribution since it would not see the education value and broader understanding that a discussion could possibly add.

The fact that *Seeing* was described by Larson as "too hot for the library" and was not

⁶⁴ Film Library Annual Report 1969-1970. Bill Sloan Papers. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

acquired by NYPL, an institution known to embrace controversial works questions if this film should be accessible in any manner. Since the library rescued the YFDC collection from disposal this group of prints did not go through NYPL official selection process. That the historically rejected *Seeing* is among them begs a consideration of whether RFVC should apply archival practices for orphan works or library acquisition practices for a circulation title.

The YFDC collection was given to a branch library, which is guided by the aforementioned principles of open access which state “no restrictions are placed on what anyone may read, see, or hear in the collections of the Branch Libraries.”⁶⁵ Consequently should the remaining YFDC titles be processed as circulating material in the Reserve Film and Video Collection? This action would be further supported by the Library’s history of acquiring controversial works from independent sources in order to fulfill their mandate of acquiring and circulating works to patrons without censorship. In a 1978 meeting with Ted Perry, Director of the Department of Film at the Museum of Modern Art, NYPL Film Librarian Sloan stated “in relation to access to controversial information...I was quite proud that our two institutions were providing this service to the New York Community.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ The New York Public Library, “The Materials Policy of the Branch Libraries of the New York Public Library; Policies for the Selection, Use and Withdrawal of all Library Materials,” Revised August 1999).

⁶⁶ William.Sloan, Letter to Ted Perry. Bill Sloan Papers. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. February 23, 1978.

The ethical concerns for the public and the filmmaker advocate that the film should be processed as an archival element and suppressed from the public catalogue. The *Village Voice* article on the 1973 screening of *Seeing* confirms the complicated nature of presenting a film made by teenagers containing graphic and sexual content to the public. NYPL regularly embraces controversial material as education, yet, film with sensitive content need extensive contextualization. The 1973 screening at The Exchange Theater example could possibly dissuade NYPL from including this title in their circulation holdings in order to prevent further unfortunate programming involving *Seeing*.

In order to mediate between the Library's activist and anti-censorship role and its stance on social engagement through thoughtful programming, *Seeing* could be processed as an archival element visible through the Library catalogue but not available for circulation. It would remain available for special programming and the record would still be visible to patrons, but not fully accessible through RFVC policies in order to mediate any further problematic screenings.

Conclusion

This thesis examined how cultural institutions can allow access to films with sensitive content by investigating processing decisions and levels of access for controversial material. Chapter one demonstrated the complicated nature of access by drawing on relevant literature;

chapter two presented an overview of the history of the YFDC collection as a case study of how films with sensitive content have been shown to audiences. Finally, chapter three focuses on the title *Seeing* as an example of a film with sensitive content and how it should be processed for NYPL's collection. Returning to the initial question guiding this research, how public cultural institutions can allow access to films with sensitive material, it is clear that contextualizing materials is crucial as Halleck and Larson demonstrated through their recommendations on viewing youth-made films.

There is a distinct division between the NYPL's public library policies in contrast to archival institutions. Archives are guided by access, although mostly for on-site viewing and for specific uses only. The Library is lead by circulating collection principles, access is mandated by their branch policy, and preservation initiatives are established to support their film circulation mission. Films with sensitive content should be accessible in cultural heritage institutions since access is the guiding mission of public cultural institutions such as libraries, archives and museums and these materials should be included in scholarships and our knowledge of film history. Further, the notion of "sensitive" is highly subjective and the Library's policies allow them to circulate materials without censorship. Collections with sensitive content must be visible to the public, researcher and scholars in order to garner interest and advocacy for funding the preservation of highly accessed works. One main concern remains how to guide the

programming around these works.

An option that could help resolve accessing films with sensitive content is “slow” programming, which means collaborating with a library employee to help shape a program by harnessing their extensive knowledge of the collection. This method reflects film library principles, and allows the patron to gain information beyond what is available through the library catalogue. Although this method can be more time consuming than the instant gratification of streaming a film online or by request, “slow” programming is especially important to gain a broader understanding of a title with controversial content. That being said, once a film is borrowed from the library for general public access, there is no way to moderate how a work will be used for public consumption. By processing *Seeing* as an intermediate between a circulating item and a suppressed archival record, the film could remain available for “slow” programming and could be utilized in screenings that cover a wide range of subjects involving teen sexuality and creativity. This scenario would allow *Seeing* to remain available to patrons while giving the Library some involvement in how the film is presented to audiences. NYPL’s extensive collection of youth media positions the institution in a favorable situation to provide viewers with contextualizing information and film pairings, following the YFDC catalogue guidelines.

A major distinction can be seen between the YFDC’s distribution method and current access principles. Larson would circulate the catalogue personally to cultural institutions and

approach organization in the hopes of collaborating on programs that would present YFDC titles and invite the young filmmakers discuss their works. Halleck also highlighted this programming foundation, since youth-media needs an anthropological view and interpretations from the filmmaker in order to gain a greater appreciation of films by young people. The Library strongly supports this type of programming, but their access policies cannot govern how films will be programmed or used by patrons. Current access methods like streaming also make it difficult to mediate how a film will be viewed and understood since it neglects the element of programming and discussion.

In sum, cultural institutions must decide between denying access to sensitive content and suppressing evidence of our painful past, or embracing them as uncomfortable relics that we acknowledge in order to go forward. That being said, library principles and foundations are built to withstand any changes in moral or ethical values that overcome society. Larson and Halleck's guidance on the contextualization of youth-made media demonstrate the ideal way to deliver films with sensitive content to the public, which reflects the established library philosophy on mediated educational public programming. This public library ideology in addition to NYPL's circulation policies will continue to protect material from being hidden from patrons and to support access to films without censorship.

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