



Narrating the preservation of a film school archive – Re-configuring the hero’s journey across the nexus of conservation and film production

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Abstract

Narrating the preservation of a film school archive—Re-configuring the hero’s journey across the nexus of conservation and film production. In 2013, a program to secure the future of the more than 1800 films produced by students in the Victorian College of Arts’ Department of Film and Television commenced at the University of Melbourne. This is a highly significant collection, with films from 1966 to the present, that contains work by some of Australia’s pre-eminent producers, cinematographers, scriptwriters, and others. Utilising narrative frameworks theory, and particularly the victim to hero narrative, this paper explores the journey taken to preserve this archive and make it accessible to current and future students and the public. This makes explicit the value of narrative inquiry as a method for active rethinking and reframing of the project, the opportunities for democratisation and increasing plurality during the project and highlighted the need to contest the celebratory narrative of project completion to ensure that the continued risk to the hero-archive remains a central institutional concern.

Keywords Film preservation · Film production · Film and sound archives · Short Film Archives · Narrative framework theory · Victorian College of the Arts · Cultural materials conservation

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Introduction

Human beings have lived out and told stories about that living for as long as we could talk. And then we have talked about the stories we tell for almost as long. These lived and told stories and the talk about the stories are one of the ways that we fill our world with meaning and enlist one another's assistance in building lives and communities (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007, p 35).

This paper examines the complexity of the preservation of a time-based archive informed by two disciplinary constructions: film production and cultural materials conservation, and, by definition, located within the broader archive sector. These interdisciplinary constructions were utilised in a program to conserve what is arguably Australia's pre-eminent student film archive, that of the Department of Film and Television at the University of Melbourne's Victorian College of Arts. The authors employed narrative framework theory and narrative techniques used in mainstream western cinema to explore the trajectory of what began as an administration issue: to preserve over 1,800 films that formed the basis of an archive of student films and to make these accessible into the future for teaching, learning, research and engagement. As the complex nature of this aim became apparent, this exigency soon formed the basis for an action-based research project during which the role of the main protagonist shifted significantly. At the end of the project, ('end' clearly being a misnomer, as the rhizomatous nature of this living archive requires continuous engagement) narrative framework theory was found to be a useful tool by which to explore its trajectory and to examine the effectiveness of particular actions taken for preservation and access. This paper brings together the story of how the archive was cast as both a problem and an opportunity, with that of the agency of those involved in ensuring its availability for film students into the future. In doing so, it explores the complex nature of the problem of preserving a time-based archive that comprises disparate content that has been produced across time but in a shared place, and which is also being added to on an annual basis. It also examines how a project such as this has no distinct disciplinary parameters but rather requires an osmotic approach framed by particular disciplinary perspectives at particular times.

Disciplines and their orthodoxies

The University of Melbourne's Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) Film and Television Digital Archive is an online repository with over 2000 student films that were produced in Melbourne from 1966 (Faculty of Fine Arts and Music n.d.). Originally comprising student works from the former Swinburne School of Film and Television this archive of celluloid and magnetic tape-based media was transferred to the VCA when the program was relocated due to an amalgamation of creative arts programs in tertiary institutions in 1992. The archive is both a retrospective digital archive of graduate student films and a born-digital pipeline and repository for all current and future student film works. The archive continues to grow in scale and is added to each year with films created by the University's Film and Television students.

Like many film school archives, the VCA Film Archives is without an archivist. In 2013, Donna Lyon, at that time a member of the Victorian College of Arts Film and Television department staff at the University of Melbourne, embarked on a large-scale digital archive project that aimed to find a solution to the question of how to preserve this significant student film archive into the future. The project was framed and initiated as a digital preservation program with a clear project plan for digitisation, preservation and accessibility, but in this form was beset by several threats including redundant media, digital disruption and difficulty of access. On the other hand, the methodology with which Lyon, as the key protagonist, was most familiar with was film production. As the project developed, the alignment of each stage of the preservation project (planning; digitising; ingesting; making discoverable) to production became clearer. (See Table 1 *Comparison of the stages of the VCA Film Archive Project mapped against the stages of producing a film* which outlines the ways in which film production was utilised by Lyon in the ‘production’ of the film archives.) As a result, the VCA Film and Television Digital Archive is now a public-facing, discoverable living archive (Faculty of Fine Arts and Music n.d.).

Using narrative framework theory to make explicit the implicit narratives that were playing out through the project, this paper examines the tensions within the project, and the resolution of these tensions, from perspectives of cultural materials conservation, film production, and archival science. This in turn explains how, when the research question was shifted from ‘*how to preserve* the films in the archives’ to ‘*how to enable* the archive to tell stories’ that a practical solution for the preservation of the films was able to be implemented.

Telling stories is a critical part of how human beings hold their past, construct meaning in the present, and envisage a future in which they have a place. The construction of a story provides a mechanism for sharing knowledge that can be universal and heterogenous. Sagas, narratives, chronicles, and other forms of storytelling represent age-old and secure ways to engage a multiplicity of viewpoints within one account. Within this multiplicity, there is also the ability for transformation and translation as the narrator creates touch points for individuals to strengthen their engagement and absorption with the narrative. In this way, the act of narration supports a structure that is nonlinear. It enables storied constructions that can communicate experience in ways that secure the nuance and complexity of personal experience within broader disciplinary and cultural experience. Clandinin and Huber talk about this as a tripartite justification for narrative inquiry that comprises personal, practical and social justification (Clandinin & Huber 2010, p 438), these being the three commonplaces that serve to ‘specify dimensions of an inquiry and serve as a conceptual framework’ (Clandinin & Huber 2010, p 436). Well-constructed narratives enable the narrator to assemble ballasts against positivist arguments that seek standards of objective verifiability that are blunt tools by which to understand nuanced human conditions that might flow from emotional, social and creative constructions. For this reason, narration is a powerful tool in the social sciences, and particularly in disciplines such as policy development, social geography, anthropology, education and cultural studies. It is also a key means of production across the creative industries.

Table 1 Comparison of the stages of the VCA Film Archive Project mapped against the stages of producing a film (Lyon 2021)

Digital archive project	Making a film
Financing & Pre-Production	
Pitch documents / funding applications: raise financing	Pitch documents / funding applications: raise financing
Draft and finalise digitisation guidelines	Draft and finalise production guidelines
Enlist volunteers and assemble project collaborators/ partners	Assemble creative team and crew
Calendar schedule and draft project schedules and milestones	Calendar schedule and draft shooting schedules
Project meetings	Production meetings
Create metadata schema	Create shotlists, callsheets, etc.
Map out pipeline / workflow / testing	Map out pipeline/ workflow/ testing
Production	
Digitising material (celluloid and magnetic media)	Filming material
Refining structured metadata	Filming and production reports to ensure all information and records are correct for later referral in post-production
Site design for audience access 1. Prototype	Daily assembly edit of rushes for stakeholders to view
Post-Production	
Quality controlling digitised films	Quality controlling filmed material
Ingest into digital asset management system and crosscheck / add to metadata	Ingest into editing system and compile footage
Implement pipeline / workflow / testing	Editing: assemble story
Story of archive evaluated (the multiplicity of the stories)	Editing: rough cuts / versions for approval
Ensure archiving principles are adhered to:	Ensure archiving principles are adhered to:
1. Technological choices	1. Technological choices
2. Data back up and redundancy	2. Data back up and redundancy
3. Relationships defined (student/ graduate)	3. Creative decisions made in editing (how footage / story is compiled)
4. Sustainability (economics resourcing)	4. Sustainability (economics resourcing)
Refine different formats and access requirements	Prepare materials and deliverables
Site Design 2. Finish design/ development of relational database (repository) where students can deposit their work, search, curate collections, then the material could be mapped to other university wide systems for further engagement opportunities, etc.	Finish editing of film
Distribution / Marketing	
Articles written to curate the collection	Preparing material for its release (websites/ press kits/ marketing info)
Interviews, media releases	Interviews, media releases
Exploitation	
Platform Release: the digital archive site	Film Festivals Premieres

Table 1 (continued)

Digital archive project	Making a film
Select films released on YouTube for further public engagement	Theatrical VOD SVOD Digital release
Digital Archive Exhibition to promote the films	Showcase opportunities ancillary exhibition, etc.

Screen production and film preservation can be seen as different ends of a production spectrum. Screen production is a creative practice that produces ‘an aggregate of images, or of images and sounds, embodied in any material that can be viewed on a screen’ (Screen Australia Act 2008, 1.3.c). On the other hand, preservation can be construed as a process to ‘prevent loss ... and prolong ... existence’ (AICCM 2002). In fact, as we argue here, screen production can be an action research method for preserving what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) identify as ‘temporality, sociality, and place’, and preservation can be an action research method for the construction of new stories.

This paper argues that prioritising the *transmission* of ideas across time and across place, rather than *medium or material*, better supports effective, complex preservation decision-making. The construction of narratives around three foci – disciplines and their orthodoxies, films and their meanings, and actions and their outcomes – supported stepped approaches enabling diverse stakeholders (professionals, academics, decision-makers, students, volunteers, the public) to engage, in ways that, and at the times when their input was most needed. In this way, the function of production as a preservation methodology is made clear and more compelling through the application of narrative techniques. The links between narrative, production and preservation offer researchers new ways to (re)consider preservation projects through a reflexive interrogation of the types of dominant narratives that exist in screen culture, in particular that of the lone hero. Through narration of steps taken to preserve a film school archive this research explores the need to re-configure the hero’s journey across the nexus of conservation and film production to challenge dominant narratives that we tell ourselves and share or learn with others.

Framing the narrative

The challenges initially presented by the VCA Film Archives were multifarious. They included copyright and permissions, diversity of formats with many being redundant, lack of funding and technical expertise, no digital preservation storage or management system and little to no interest in supporting the initial digitisation process. Positioning the project as a preservation undertaking established the narrative framing of the problem as linear and heroic ‘How can we preserve this collection so that it can be accessible into the future?’, whereas the problem was rhizomatous. This narrative was given weight by virtue of its location alongside much broader narratives that located the VCA Film Archive as part of the story of the development of the Australian film and television industry and its links to Australian identity; the

development of film and technology from the second half of the twentieth century to the present; the recording of social values and cultural identities over that time; and the validation of the VCA as a pre-eminent institution through its illustrious alumni, and more. Lyon sought to balance this by articulating the provenance of the collection and asserting its significance and contextual value.

The historical narrative: situating the archive

VCA Film and Television's long history spanning over 50 years creates a rich historical narrative. The themes and subject matters of the films in the archive vary, yet they were all derived from an ethos of practice-based filmmaking (learning-by-doing), which is described by author Barbara Paterson (1996, p 47) as "a recognised experimental philosophy practiced at various alternative schools in Melbourne in the 1960s and 1970s." Paterson recalls nothing fancy about the film school, its equipment or facilities, instead its success lay in a curriculum that focused on making films to help develop the filmmaker's voice as artist. This identity has held firm over the years of technological change, institutional pressures, and digital disruption. Today the VCA Film and Television School is revered as a premier Australian film school proclaiming an impressive list of alumni, including Gillian Armstrong (*Oscar and Lucinda*, *Death Defying Acts*), David Michod (*Animal Kingdom*, *The King*), Adam Elliott (*Mary and Max*, *Harvie Krumpet*) and producer Maggie Miles (*High Ground*, *Paper Planes*).

In its initial iteration as the Swinburne Film and Television School, the program opened at a pivotal time in the history of Australian film and television. Australia had a long and proud history of film production prior to the introduction of television in 1956, but by the 1960s there was growing public unease at the lack of Australian content in television. This culminated in the Senate Select Committee on the Encouragement of Australian Productions for Television (the Vincent Report) in 1963 which found that 83 percent of drama programs were imported from the USA and 13 per cent from Great Britain and that Australian content was 'so minute as to be almost non-existent' (Commonwealth of Australia 1963). Three years earlier in 1960, responding to the impact of television on Australian culture and industry the Australian Postmaster-General, Charles Davidson, who was responsible for issuing television licences had required 40 per cent Australian content overall to be broadcast on Australian television, with four hours in peak viewing time every 28 days. In 1962, this was increased to 45 per cent overall and eight hours in peak time, and in 1965 to 50 per cent content. By 1968, television stations were also required to transmit 18 h of locally made content per month (Herd 2005, Rossiter n.d., p 2). The VCA Film Archive, therefore, reflects educational responses to new policies, which in turn reflected a growing sense of the significance of media in national identity, and films in the archive reflect this new identity-based agenda. Film technology also changed dramatically over this period, and the various film formats in the collection represented the technological history of film production from the second half of the twentieth century. This historical value, however, compounded the complexity

of providing a ‘one size fits all’ preservation solution based primarily on preserving format.

On the other hand, the provenance of this collection was relatively simple to navigate due to institutional ownership of the copyright in the films. This was despite complexity around the copyright transfer of the original Swinburne films. Mostly, student films were produced utilising industry standard best practice processes and procedures, including copyright agreements assigned to the film school. Other agreements needed to be in place such as location and permit clearances, crew agreements and music release forms and were neatly filed away under the filmmakers’ names tracing the rich lineage of the collection.

The vested university copyright interest in the films meant that master archival copies were stored numerically in an archive room. The films were mastered on the highest quality available at the time, displaying the historical shift in technology moving from 16 to 35 mm masters to high-definition analogue tape, such as Digital Betacam, Betacam SP, HDCAM and XDCAM. Back-ups or “clones” were mastered onto U-matic and VHS tape. These clones were often used in classroom settings to show other students examples of their peer’s work. Tasked with the care of this archive as part of her role in the film and television department, Lyon knew the importance of mastering the final film to tape or celluloid film. This final stage process in the film value chain (a model entailing the processes of filmmaking that includes development, through to finance, production, licensing, distribution and exploitation (Finney 2014)) recognised the penultimate stage of filmmaking – the chance to screen the work to an audience. Like the many filmmakers at VCA, Lyon had gained experience volunteering on and making independent short films and so her empathy with both student as filmmaker and educational institution as producer made her the ideal protagonist to embark on a self-prescribed hero’s journey.

The contemporary narrative: situating the protagonists

The power of film to shape public perception, and thereby shape global culture and history, is well documented. Whilst people love to talk about and study films, this passion has not translated to the preservation of films, the process being linked to industry methods of post-production and a focus on materiality. This focus has had particular traction since the late 1960s with the rising awareness of the danger posed by cellulose nitrate film stock and marshalled as a call to arms in the USA as ‘Nitrate will not wait’ and repurposed in Australia as ‘Nitrate won’t wait’ (Slide 1992, p 1). Although the VCA collection did not contain nitrate film, the framing of film archive preservation as a material and mechanistic undertaking was a linear narrative that presented immense challenges, particularly as traditional processes were being transformed by new possibilities for streaming and exhibiting films on digital platforms (Wengstrom 2013).

The VCA Film Archive began in 2013, a period characterised by the threat of digital disruption. It was the year that Blockbuster shut their video chain store doors, Apple Macbook stopped making computers with disc drives, and audiences were commonly searching for content on YouTube. Student films, once seen as the calling

card for a career in the industry through a showcase at a film festival, suddenly had multiple pathways to reach an audience. The usual trajectory for a good student film might mean a premiere at an Australian or international film festival, a sale to a television station and the establishment of prestige and success amongst peers and industry. Better yet, a successful short film could secure a filmmaker screen agency government funding or land them a career in Hollywood. In this digital landscape, students who did not follow the well-worn and increasingly competitive pathway of film festivals were happy to screen their work online or simply showcase them on their own website. However, the copyright structure and agreement with the actors only granted filmmakers the right to screen their films at film festivals. The film school's prevention of student films screening online became a gatekeeper between filmmaker and audience, and it became clear that the institution needed to rethink its distribution agreements and consider a digital strategy quickly. It was here that Lyon stepped into the role of the protagonist and accepted her call to adventure. Over the next six years, she embarked on a heroic journey in which she sought to transform the collection and return home with the elixir (a PhD and a fully functional and accessible digital archive).

Narrative constructions: archive as hero

Story-telling acts as a ballast for those seeking to identify, understand and communicate complexity in ways that ensure nuance and plurality in the development of inquiry and in the articulation of outcomes. For this reason, narrative frameworks are particularly useful in exploring cross-cultural or interdisciplinary encounters. As such encounters take on increasingly significant roles in critical scholarly inquiry and professional responsibilities, narratives provide a framework that can be securely grounded in individual experience. Narratives also provide resonant frameworks in which difficult or complex issues can be raised, shared and addressed. That archives are recognised as sites occupied by such issues is relatively well rehearsed (Ketelaar 2005; McKemmish et al 2010; Nakata et al 2008; Russell 2007; Thorpe 2007; Wilson 1997), and closing the narrative gap between the non-Indigenous population and Indigenous peoples is imperative to achieving social justice (Barrowcliffe 2021a, pp 151–152). As brokers of records, archives are uniquely placed to assist in this work, as they act to corroborate or contest the stories that build narratives of place, identity and action. As repositories of multi-media, film archives are particularly well placed to support multiple interrogations.

In Australia, the Tandanya Adelaide Declaration on Indigenous Archives cautions archivists that process embeds inequity, noting that:

Collecting, categorising and archiving centres around power, and collecting institutions are in power, so we have to be mindful as we go ahead into aspirational spaces of change that the sector does not just continue to do that which we are critiquing (Barrowcliffe et al. 2021b, p 175).

As the VCA Film Archive Project progressed, so did the realization that it was the method of archive production and not the preservation process that offered the

strongest possibilities for a continuing preservation model. If the project was to succeed, the narrative needed to be reconfigured from *preservation by protection* to *preservation by presentation*. In this way, user engagement ('audience'), and how the films were going to be drawn upon in a rich array of contexts through their metadata and curation became central, and production became the focus for securing the archive's future. Understanding that the archive also had its own constructive narrative (a functional nature and the embodiment of its own history) enabled the archives to be recognised as a site of multiple agencies, with the expertise, labour and skills of archivists and conservators located by their engagement with the multi-agency of the archive. In this way, the archive could be envisaged to be its own protagonist and the difficulties of past attempts to preserve the film archive were not simply shifted to the end of the project once the experts had finished.

Narrative framework theory proved useful in understanding the constructive narratives that the project was building around the film archive. In 'Characters matter: How narratives shape affective responses to risk communication', Shanahan et al (2019) identify the power of 'narrative transportation' in eliciting affective responses in flood-prone communities along the Yellowstone River in Montana. This paper built on a previous publication 'How to conduct a Narrative Policy Framework study' (Shanahan et al 2017, p 235) which examined three character descriptors: the hero, or the fixer of the problem; the victim which is being harmed by the problem; and the villain that is causing the problem or inflicting the harm. Both contain principles that are relevant to the film archive preservation project. First, framed as a preservation project the archive was posited as a victim that needed saving. This in turn posited Lyon, as the professional staff member who had taken on the task of 'saving' the archive, as a potential hero, in turn creating an onerous and weighty responsibility that was not sustainable beyond the project. Second, in such a scenario there was little opportunity to harness the power of narrative transportation, as colleagues were characterised as 'helpers' or 'contributors' rather than being transported into a heroic participatory relationship with the archive. It was, however, the concept of the audience (Shanahan et al 2018, 2019) that proved to be the most effective mechanism to transport the story of the archive from a victim to a hero. Here, other valuable points of intersection emerged including how providing spatial context, by locating the problem within a larger socio-economic and geographic setting, more effectively aligns the experience of the audience to the process and produces stronger audience engagement (Shanahan et al 2018, p 930). In this respect, the locational and temporal nature of the archive, Melbourne-based and documenting over 50 years of social and cultural practices predominantly in Melbourne, became effective in transporting the audience into the narrative of the future of the VCA Film Archive.

Within this story of the VCA Archives, harm was being caused by inaction rather than action, with the organisation with responsibility for the archive, the VCA, cast as the villain. This hero/victim narrative links into the classical design structure seen in mainstream screenwriting, known as the Hero's Journey, a term coined by Joseph Campbell (Hambly 2021, p 136). This was not a particularly effective framework within which to negotiate significant investment. The value of accepting the truism that: 'The same entity can be a hero in one setting and a villain in another'

(Shanahan et al. 2017, p 335) was slowly realised over the course of the project. This realization, and the actions to recast the problem of the salvation of the archive, created a quantum shift in the effectiveness of the project. In exploring narrative policy frameworks Shanahan et al (2018, p 948) framed their risk narrative with five categories: experience/setting, problem definition, villain, victim, hero, and policy solution. In their 2019 study, Shanahan et al. found that the ‘Characters in action’ segments of their study of the Victim narrative elicited a largely negative affective response, the Hero narrative elicited a positive response, and the most positive response was evident for the Victim-to-Hero narrative (Shanahan et al 2019, pp 18–19).

The project was linked to three further narratives: first *risk*, that the archive was in dire physical risk and needed saving; second *purpose*, that inaccessibility meant that the archive as a record of student filmmaking was not fulfilling its education purposes; and third *value*, that as a result of these two problems the significance of the archives as a cultural resource of value locally and internationally was at risk. These narratives were enacted *by* a set of characters (the protagonists), *through* the films and their multitude of meanings and *in* observing the production phase as a process of narrative inquiry. They were framed within a Hero-to-Victim/Victim-to-Hero narrative and enhanced by using elements belonging to the classical design structure of dominant western cinema where the “individual’s role is to pursue a goal to resolution and closure” (Hambly 2021, p 146).

Films and their meanings

Narrative structure and techniques are embedded into filmmaking as a way of connecting ideas to audience. The case study of the VCA Film Archive demonstrates the power of narrative in communicating student films as valid and significant archival materials both to expert and non-expert audiences. The proliferation of moving images and access to screen content, along with the study of filmmaking at tertiary institutions suggests that to make student films one needs to study student films. Yet student films have traditionally not been part of the moving image canon (Wilson 2011) and this exclusion became a justification to further the narrative as to the project need and its benefits.

The VCA Film Archive Project began as a practice-led research inquiry into digitising, preserving and disseminating a student audio-visual archive, resulting in a doctoral thesis and an institutionally successful project. Lyon’s background as a screen producer informed her decision to reflexively provide a narrative account of how she went about producing the digital archive project when writing the dissertation. The research sought to understand how a film producer’s knowledge was constructed through developing each stage of a preservation project as akin to producing a multiplatform film, following the film value chain model (as evidenced in Table 1). On making this connection and in securing some project funding, the researcher began to bring in expertise and volunteers to help deliver the requirements of each stage of the project.

Beyond the pragmatics, the concept of the archive and the narratives it enabled were explored as temporal—moving along and through a continuum. Clandinin and Connelly describe narratives as having a history, as always “moving forwards” (2000, p 145), and the theoretical journey created by narrative construction drew support for the project, particularly when trying to excite volunteers to detail and input metadata (a meticulous and time-consuming process). Lyon characterised the archives and records as ‘alive’ and ‘becoming’ in line with Clandinin and Connelly’s ideas around the narrative inquirer, as someone who needs “to write about people, places and things as *becoming* rather than *being*” (2000, p. 145) and in line with McKemmish’s description of archives as “always in the process of becoming” (McKemmish 1994, p 200). Such notions are central to Clandinin and Connelly’s three-dimensional narrative inquiry framework—interaction, continuity, situation and place. Producing an archive as a receptacle of multiple stories, and multiple interrogations (people, themes/content, practices, materials/technology, and so on) contained within a broader continuum reflects Frank Upward’s four-dimensional records continuum: “document creation; records capture; the organisation of corporate and personal memory; and the pluralisation of collective memory” (Upward 1997a, b, p 11). This structure is evident in Table 1 in production of archives and of film. The researcher’s function as an actor and storyteller within the archive enabled them to explore possibilities for further understanding their experience and to begin to articulate this for future researchers. Interactions with characters in the story and the films themselves became a “way of understanding experience” (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, p xxvi). There were also situational narratives present, concerning the digital and physical space of the films, the locations within them and the history of the film school. These narratives interacted to generate new discoveries, challenges and opportunities that would (re)define the archive and its content. These included identifying themes such as architecture, Indigeneity, costume, the techniques of production and so on, for students and researchers to search and engage with areas of interest.

The usefulness of continuity as a narrative space can depend upon how past situations are discerned and how these previous experiences influence the present, in turn shaping future experiences and allowing conscious imagining of the future. Reflexively assessing Lyon’s contribution as a protagonist within a continuum helped shift the narrative. The core work of the VCA Film School had always been the practice of *filmmaking*, a practice predicated on conveying a story to an audience, and not film *preservation*. Abstract or literal, the filmmaker works to locate and express an idea for wider translation and meaning making. Despite some previous attempts to preserve the material, there had existed no expertise to provide preservation knowledge. The lack of alignment between the University and the Film School’s obligation to protect and preserve its student audio-visual collection became increasingly apparent as the story unfolded and located in that of a wider national problem of preservation, became linked to the articulation of the National Film and Sound Archive’s *Deadline 2025: Collections at Risk* (2016) which sounded the alarm bells on the fate of magnetic media and its ensuing obsolescence. Lyon initially employed these situations of risk and reveal as narrative techniques to attract funding support for the project. She likened the urgency of the project to the ticking time bomb motif

employed by screenwriters to heighten the audience's attention and drive suspense. It locates what is at stake. This enables an understanding of what creates audience buy-in and how to entice them to care for and root for the protagonist. Stories were crafted about films in the archive and their multiplicity of meanings; film as a vehicle through which students could explore their identity and engage in a socio-cultural discourse to raise concerns and make sense of the world; or the ability of films to impact the lives and careers of filmmakers and the people in front of and behind the camera. Stories were shared about personal histories and connections evoked through the exploration of memory. Knowledge, both practical and theoretical, grew in the engagement of past and present experiences and, as future plans for and actions of the archive were discussed, and the demands of the present situation translated into (re) imagining intentions for the future.

Producing an archive as a process of narrative inquiry

Archivist Ray Edmondson identifies the myriad challenges presented by archives and digital technology: "...software and hardware progression, commercial versus public interest, economic sustainability, and risk management" (Edmondson 2016, p 71). Table 1 demonstrates how the project dealt with each of these challenges. At the same time once the project moved into the complex production processes of digitisation, preservation and interface operability, the narrative began to shift into a victim-to-hero/ hero-to-victim narrative as the challenges continued to present themselves.

Joseph Campbell's seminal text *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell 1968) offers the myth-based framework of the 'monomyth' or 'Hero's Journey' to understand the construction of modern day and past stories. As a monomythic 'universal' story reflection on narrative demonstrated why the hero narrative was problematic for this project.

Hollywood blockbusters have long modelled the classical design of the three-act structure that utilises the Hero's journey to ensure the success of a film with audiences. It has only been recently that researchers have challenged this dominant narrative structure, in part because "Campbell interpreted myths from the sociopolitical-cultural viewpoint of a mid- twentieth-century, White, male American" (Hambly 2021, p 139). The hero's journey asserts the individual protagonist must face a series of obstacles and hurdles in pursuit of a goal (and enlightenment). Lyon, as producer of the project and researcher, played out this trope over a six-year period, declaring a transformational journey in the writing of her dissertation about the project. There had been other protagonists before her, such as previous heads of schools and administrators who had sought the digitisation of the archive but to no avail. On accepting the challenge, Lyon embraced the hero/saviour role and set out to battle and face the challenges and obstacles along the way (lack of funding, resourcing, and support) with fierce determination.

The process of production proved far more unwieldy than anticipated. It took two years to attract funding, at least two years to digitise, catalogue, quality control, and standardise the films and another two years to create a functional site that could be accessed by the institution. It then took another project to release a curated selection

of the films on YouTube for the public engagement. Hero turned to Victim as the overwhelming nature of the project became apparent, from coordinating a large team of volunteers to raising finance, creating metadata and managing the complexities of digitisation and preservation standards and processes. The story of hero/saviour is not uncommon in grassroots community-style archives, and independent film projects. Yet inadequate resourcing and frameworks can leave the person spearheading the project vulnerable and the vision under threat. As the hero narrative was threatened, our hero realised she was but a victim of an institutional problem that did not truly value its moving image history.

As the research production neared its end, Lyon reclaimed the victim narrative, inserting herself into the overarching story of the project to create “a mutually constructed story out of the lives of both researcher and participant” (Connelly and Clandinin 1990, p 12), and locating the various characters and protagonists involved in the project within a co-construction of meaning.

Actions and their outcomes

Within a preservation narrative, conservators are also often cast as heroes within tropes of disaster, expertise and salvation. Within the framework of hero, villain and victim postulated by Shanahan et al (2019) preservation action is often given over to the hero, saving the object (victim) from the villain (time, poor restoration, inherent vice). This leitmotif is emphasised in articles that position the conservator as the expert who can enable ‘dying’, and sometimes ‘dead’ objects to be restored, their meaning revealed, and their contribution secured. Another familiar trope is that of the use of new technology to reveal ‘secrets’, undiscovered signatures, a repainted canvas, or a hidden under-drawing. This notion of ‘the big reveal’ is a common motif in reality TV and plays to a well-known narrative—that of the conservator-hero using their skills to save an object in jeopardy. Both narratives were part of the ‘Nitrate Won’t Wait’ campaign to reveal and remove nitrate film to save film archives from the risk of combustion. The metanarrative is of the inherent value of cultural material as a carrier of knowledge, and a ballast of identity, holding valuable content for the future.

While this metanarrative asserts value, this project took as its point of departure the archive as an active entity in the process of preservation. This is not to negate the shift in the archive paradigm which sees the story of the archivist move from passive / objective keeper of truth (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 5) to gatekeeper, cultural driver and knowledge co-curator (Acland 1990; Gracy 2013, 365). Returning to the narrative of the VCA Film Archive project, two critical aspects were called into play. First, it was necessary for those seeking a breakthrough strategy for the preservation of the archive to secure a rich, relevant, and interconnected professional, scholarly, and technological toolkit suitable to address the complexity of issues raised by the preservation of a student film archive. The disciplines of film production, conservation, information technology, archival science and others contributed to this, but additional tools were required. Second, in prioritising the core function of film as a communicative medium,

with an audience and a story, access became a method, not an outcome. Access enabled the hero status of the archive to be activated in such a way that the archive could ‘speak for itself’, mediated by technology and by archival standards of record management, retrieval, identification, intellectual property and artists’ rights, and other professional standards including those embedded in legalities. The emphasis then became about seeking an audience who could engage with this significant hero, and of giving the archive a platform, rather than resuscitating it on a laboratory bench.

The VCA Film Archive intersected with several effective tropes used within screenplay writing for films, including the ticking time bomb motif to express the urgent need for moving image preservation and the Hero’s Journey to narrate the researcher and archive’s journey. It established its place or setting; the VCA as Australia’s oldest film school. It drew on the characters within the archive; the famous filmmakers who had gone on to contribute to Australia’s national and cultural identity, and the films that spoke to Melbourne’s changing milieu and the creators both on and behind screen. Each funding application positioned the audience in a way that allowed for new narrative telling’s. Within these telling’s film was explored as object to justify a project dealing with metadata. Arguments were posited for the films to be seen as a democratic tool, claiming the need to give the films back to the film students so they could access them. The films were celebrated in the archive as cultural artefacts that signified moving image culture and history. There were many collective contributions along the way, including from staff and alumni involvement to sub-projects involving the industry and wider university. But as time went on, the narrative persuasions used to affect change were left to the researcher to implement, with a commensurate shift from a Hero-to-Victim narrative. Through reflecting on the narration of the researcher’s journey, this paper argues that dominant narratives, such as the Hero’s Journey, are subject to perpetuating an individualistic narrative that can limit the possibilities for systemic change. Hambly (2021, p 148) writes:

Unknowingly or not, Campbell interpreted myths from an American, White, Western psychoanalytic, individualistic perspective. He colonised other ways of thinking and made them his own. He did this from a passionate and positive belief in the oneness of human experience and the ability of the individual to find self-fulfillment.

As Hambly goes on to point out, this paradigmatic way of thinking is not universal and does not embrace the diversity of the world we live in. It does not allow for multiple narratives to exist. The researcher’s background in film and television saw Lyon trained to understand film through the lens of the classic Hollywood three-act structure. More recently, researchers and filmmakers have challenged these entrenched narratives to embrace decolonised approaches to the thinking, study and practice of filmmaking, providing a much broader literature from which to draw. As Barrowcliffe (2021a) argues, the work of protagonists such as Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000) and Ann Laura Stoler (2010, 2018) provides examples of how counter-narratives need to and can be constructed. While beyond the scope of this paper, Indigenous narratives, knowledges, and ways of knowing, despite being an important part of contemporary professional archives practice, remain relatively

unacknowledged within the film archive sector, and a detailed analysis of narrative and counter-narrative within the sector is an important project that remains unaddressed.

Connelly and Clandinin's three-dimensions of space show that past stories can be what point us to the future. The future of the VCA Film Archive is now available in a digital platform, engaging all current production-based students (approximately 120 each year), spanning undergraduate and graduate cohorts. It is accessed by alumni and film schools around the world and is used actively in teaching, research and engagement, but the institution still does not support its full capacity. Achieving full support means long-term investment in an operable service model that ensures the audio-visual film data is stored on its own system, metadata is checked and refined, and the search engine is re-developed with future user engagement in mind. An education or outreach program would ensure students are educated as to the value of the archive and support its continual promotion through engagement and industry means. This support for stories made in the film department would ignite creative research opportunities and spark new narratives for the future. In line with the idea of contemporary archival research occupying a multiverse (Gilliland, McKemmish, Lau 2017), this platform development would allow for a collective storied approach. In doing so, it supports multiple and inclusive ways of practice that adopt non-hegemonic models of storytelling and production.

Conclusion

Stories are imagined, lived out and told and provide meaning in which to navigate our lives and interact with one another (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007, p 35). Narrative theory and narrative techniques can help to better describe, explain and understand human agency in past, present, and future events. We began this article by discussing the challenge faced by a significant student film archive that had no archivist and no clear support beyond a continued commitment to collect and house the content. We examined the coming together of three disciplines: film production, cultural materials conservation, and archival science, to preserve and provide access to this archive, and to demonstrate the value of reflexively analysing film archive presentation.

Through an analysis of this preservation project lifecycle, this paper sought to tell the story of how the archive was cast as both a problem and an opportunity. The strategies used to develop and create a digital archive project were examined through a post-narrative reflection that told how the researcher engaged in storytelling techniques to garner interest in the project and successfully realise its implementation. By prioritising the value of the archives in the transmission of ideas across time and place through narrative constructs, and as central to cultural production, we demonstrated how effective strategies can be deployed to inform decisions across the project's lifespan.

Narrative theory and narrative techniques can play a role in justifying film production as a preservation methodology. In this case study of the VCA Film Archive, character descriptors, analyses of time and space, and the utilization of classical filmmaking design structure and techniques were all used to test how narratives can

influence and support a project throughout its development. Narratives also help researchers understand they have a choice to contribute to the propagation of individual narratives over collective ones.

Through re-considering the stages taken to preserve and provide access to a film school archive, the researchers began to consider the need to re-configure the hero's journey evident in both preservation projects and film production (as process and product). As the archive adopted the hero character, the researcher could step back and reclaim a new narrative through a reconstruction of self within the research. But outside of the Hollywood construct, there is no such thing as a self-sustaining hero. As the VCA Film Archive is still not institutionally supported at its full capacity, its future continues to be at risk. It is time, perhaps, to challenge the dominant narratives that we have told ourselves, learnt and shared with others and adopt more collective approaches and narratives that can better support a sustainable ecology. In this way, the archive-as-hero, nurtured and supported by a strong matrix of professionals, disciplines, stakeholders and audiences, can grow and thrive for generations to come.

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