

You are the cheese to my macaroni

Preserving the archive of Australia's oldest film school

Donna L. Hensler

It has been said that short films are just like cheese—they get better with age.¹ Taking this analogy further, good cheese depends on proper care and storage. It needs to be housed in its own capacious, gloomy, cheesy cave, residing at just the right temperature. Attention needs to be given to the humidity, and the area should be clean, free of dust, and checked often. This is similar to storing celluloid film and magnetic media; unlike chalk and cheese, the moving image and manchego have much in common and their similarities go far beyond taste and enjoyment. These living, breathing organisms will alter their state as a consequence of temperature, humidity and light. It is these reactions that make the preservation and digitisation of the Victorian College of the Arts Film and Television School (VCA FTV) audiovisual archive a most pressing need.

Since 1966, VCA FTV (originally Swinburne School of Film and Television) has attracted aspiring filmmakers from all walks of life, who have gone on to have their films screened at every prestigious film event imaginable. From the Oscars to the Emmys, from Cannes to Sundance, many high-profile stages and screens have shown the work of the school and its alumni. VCA FTV has produced an impressive list of



graduates, including directors Gillian Armstrong (*Little women, Oscar and Lucinda*), Robert Luketic (*Legally blonde, Monster-in-law*), Adam Elliot (*Harvie Krumpet*), Andrew Dominik (*Chopper*), Justin Kurzel (*Snowtown, Macbeth*), Tony Ayres (*The slap*) and cinematographer Adam Arkapaw (*Animal kingdom, Top of the lake*).

The wish to preserve and digitise the large archive of graduate short films is not a new one. Former head of school David Price actively worked for years to get such a project started, but, due to lack of resources and infrastructure, only small headway was made.

In 2013, in my role as VCA screen production coordinator, I took on the role of distributing the FTV's short films, which had generated a buzz beyond academia. It soon became apparent that the general vibe among past and present students was that the films they directed and produced at the school went into the VCA vault and *died*.

Encouraged by the academic staff and the current head of school, Nicolette Freeman, I became interested in helping VCA FTV distribute its films online. Following current digital distribution processes, which are at the forefront of business development in the motion picture and television industries, and with the aid of the school, I began to investigate digital distribution as a way to disseminate the VCA FTV archive holdings. We discovered great potential to release the archive materials for broad research and education, which would also bring other benefits: raising the profile of our graduates, and promoting the course.

The idea quickly gained momentum and in 2015 VCA FTV, which was fast approaching its 50th anniversary (being celebrated in June 2016), set about getting the archive recognised as one of the cultural collections of the

Opposite: A sample of the collection in storage, 2016. Photograph by Donna Hensler.

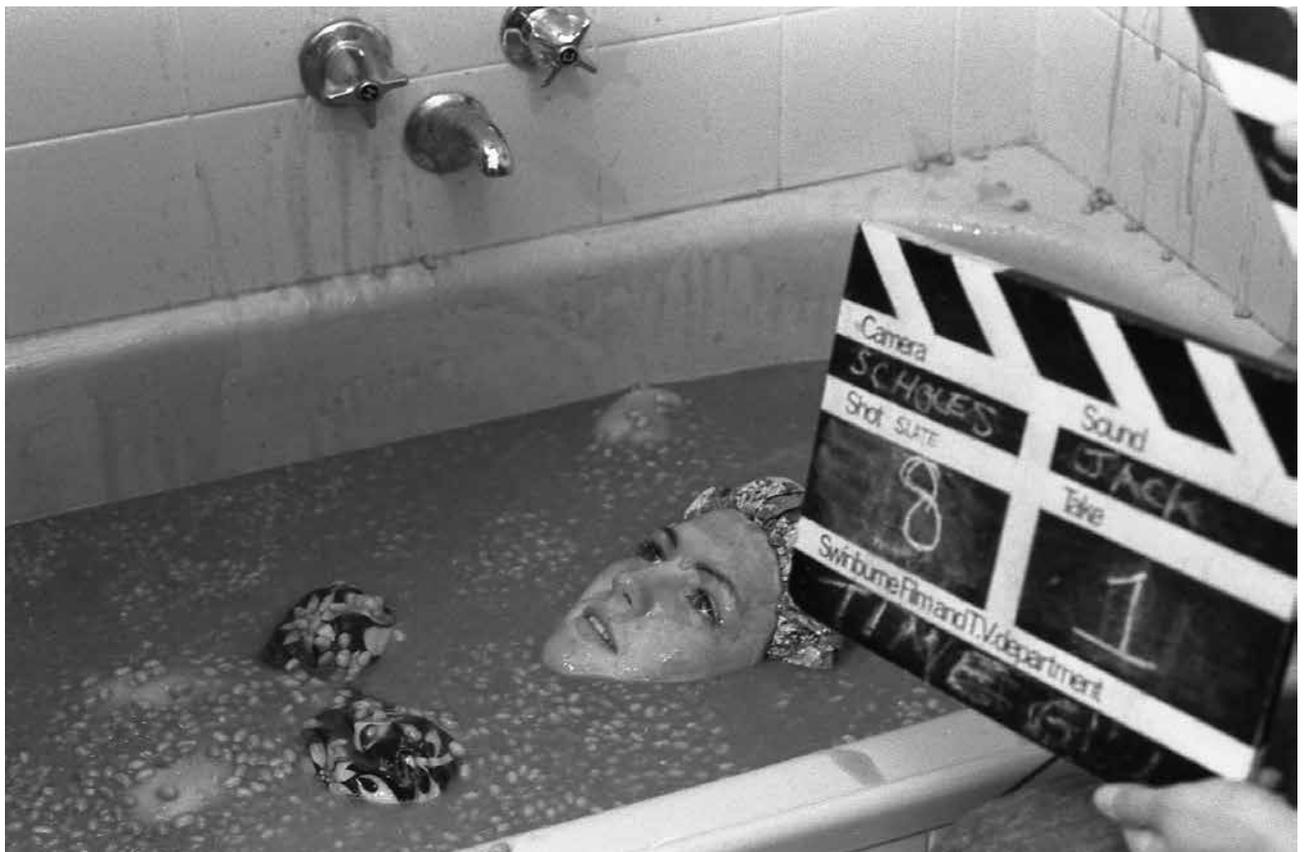
Below: Scene from *The roof needs mowing*, directed by Gillian Armstrong, 1971.

University of Melbourne. As part of this, a significance assessment was completed, in order to further understand and test the importance of the collection.² The results were unanimous and the assessment confidently confirmed the school's suspicions—not only of the cultural

and historical importance of the collection, but also of the pressing need for digital preservation to start straight away, to avoid any further deterioration of the magnetic material or loss of film.

The archive is home to well over 1,700 short films, dating back to

1967, yet despite an impressive array of talent sitting on its shelves, the films are poorly stored on a variety of physical media, such as 16 mm and 35 mm celluloid film, and unstable video formats such as U-Matic and Digi Beta tape. The need for adequate preservation before it is



Cataloguing the uncommon

Cassandra Gorton

Have you ever seen someone taking a bath in a tub full of baked beans? What about a Nazi officer being murdered by a puppet? A volatile relationship breakdown?

Okay, that last one is almost a certainty, but I can guarantee that the others are unique situations. Luckily for us, they've been caught on film by the past and present students of the Victorian College of the Arts Film and Television School. Unluckily, that film is currently stored away, never broadcast to the general public, and gradually disintegrating.

I am one of a handful of volunteers helping Donna Hensler complete her mammoth task of digitising, cataloguing and properly housing more than 1,700 student films. Part of my role has included viewing a selection of the films, to record the appropriate metadata for a catalogue and YouTube. Metadata fields might include the director's name, what format the film was recorded on, and whether it has subtitles, to name but a few. Often that information can only be gathered from the film itself.

The VCA does not have its own archivist and, strangely, film students are not eager to correctly fill out tedious spreadsheets that require a standardised vocabulary—nor are they taught how to do so. As an example from students' own records of their films, I've seen the term 'squids' used to define a genre. When was the last time you went to the cinema and enjoyed a classic squid masterpiece?

Metadata is vital for a catalogue of films. This detailed and accurate information ensures that the end-user, be they a student of the VCA, a teacher or a film-lover, can find exactly what they're looking for in the collection. The end-user may only be interested in dramas, films by a particular director, or what's available on DVD. And that's the aim of this project—to see the films used.

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too late is urgent, vividly illustrated in the National Film and Sound Archive's recent report *Deadline 2025: Collections at risk*, which stresses that, by the year 2025, magnetic media will have disintegrated to the point where the content is lost forever.³

Just like cheese, film thrives on attention, so digitising and preserving this collection is critical if this rich cultural legacy is to stay alive and continue to be seen, enjoyed and studied. At the moment, access to the films in the archive is limited to VHS and DVD compilations of some of the film master copies. Not all the films are on viewing copies, and those that are can only be viewed by enrolled students and staff at the Lenton Parr Library on the Southbank campus. Information on the collection is also limited, with basic facts such as the filmmaker, year of production, performers and genre catalogued on a simple software program—or in staff members' memories.

VCA FTV's aims for the collection are simple: to give educational and public audiences the chance to discover, watch and study short films made by students, *and* to provide open access to an historically and internationally important resource for socially, culturally and aesthetically significant viewing and research. Digitising this collection safeguards

Scene from *Blackbird*, directed by Amie Batalibasi, 2015.



its preservation, and digital access makes our aims a reality. Our next step is to decide how best to store the digital versions, using a digital asset management system (DAMS), and to create standardised and detailed metadata (cataloguing information) to increase its value and access potential. Developing ways

to involve both new and existing audiences, so that the digital archive becomes a vital learning, research and engagement tool, means that this living, breathing organism can continue to evolve and interact in a new virtual environment.

The Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts and Melbourne

Conservatorium of Music has gone part way to recognising the importance of this cultural heritage, by investing in the digitisation of 50 films of particular cultural, social and historical significance. These will be featured on the VCA Film and Television School's very own YouTube channel, to be viewed free



of charge by anybody, anywhere in the world. Following in the footsteps of the prestigious British Pathé, which claims to have the largest archive of historical film on YouTube, our channel will be a practical way to publish a growing database of past and present student film works. It will undoubtedly attract a new generation of filmmakers and storytellers, making the film and arts industries in Australia stronger and more vibrant, and capturing the cultural Zeitgeist. Because the school owns the copyright on all its student films, once we have cleared all other

underlying rights we can exhibit a large proportion of our holdings. Looking to the future, by the year 2018 all of the school's graduating films will be available for watching online.

In the age of digital information and 'participatory culture',⁴ the ability to circulate media and content creates inherent value and fosters awareness of digital objects and collections. When the content is easily searchable, the navigation is functional, and the films are accompanied by detailed metadata and clever categorisation, an audiovisual cultural collection

like ours can connect with the public emotionally and even transform their daily experience.

Wine and cheese are not the only ageless companions. The next time you enjoy a cheese and wine night, why not match it with a film? The shorter the better, I say.

Donna L. Hensler is a Melbourne-based film producer and the screen production coordinator at the Victorian College of the Arts Film and Television School. She has been working in the arts and film industries for more than 15 years, predominantly in film and television production. Donna is currently undertaking a Master of Fine Arts (Research) on setting up VCATube, a digital channel for the school's audiovisual holdings. And yes, she does like cheese.

For more information on the 50th anniversary of the Victorian College of the Arts Film and Television School, see vca.unimelb.edu.au/engage/vca-film-and-television-50th-anniversary and [facebook.com/VCAFILMTV50](https://www.facebook.com/VCAFILMTV50).

- 1 Snowden Becker, *On Janus and juvenilia: Preserving student films in institutional archives*, Austin: University of Texas, AERI, 2010, p. 5.
- 2 Melanie Horder, 'Significance assessment: The Victorian College of the Arts Film School Archive', unpublished report prepared for the University of Melbourne, 2015, p. 4.
- 3 National Film and Sound Archive, *Deadline 2025: Collections at risk*, October 2015, nfsa.gov.au/2025, accessed 24 November 2015.
- 4 Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009.