

Unlocking the VCA Film and Television Archive

Ten ways to bring new life to a historical audiovisual collection

Donna Lyon

Five years ago I began a project to digitise, preserve and disseminate a 50-year-old mixed-media audiovisual archive belonging to the University of Melbourne's Department of Film and Television, then part of the Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts and Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, situated on the Southbank campus. The VCA Film and Television Archive comprises current and historic short films, including those made by students at the Swinburne Film and Television School (established as Australia's first film school in 1966). In 1992, the school transferred to the VCA, bringing with it this archive of celluloid and magnetic films, and their copyright. Since that time, a copy of each graduating student's short film has been lodged in the collection each year.

The mid-2000s saw the VCA become an affiliated college of the University of Melbourne; a few years later, it amalgamated with the university, and now sits in the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music. In 2013 I started working at the Film School as the screen production coordinator, and took on the task of distributing short films that had become known beyond the academy. I soon discovered that the films were difficult to access, with viewing copies available only on DVD from the Lenton Parr Library on the Southbank campus. This problem of access led to the realisation that the master material was under threat of format obsolescence, which led to conversations on digital disruption and the need to access materials online for research, teaching, learning and community engagement. These discussions culminated in this large-scale Digital Archive project.

Fast forward and we have now made digital copies of, and thus preserved the content of, some 1,900 graduate short films, dating from 1966 to 2019. Each film has been carefully catalogued using standardised metadata, and is available on a university-owned, password-protected

website for staff and students of VCA Film and Television. For the first time, students can enter their own metadata on their film works, and also upload still images, press-kits, scripts and production notes, so that their films and related material are searchable by others for research purposes. Soon, the faculty and wider university will be able to search the archive and create collections based on themes, genres and other elements of interest.

To arrive at this point of greatly improved access has taken a significant amount of work. The story of this archive is one of cultural memory, format obsolescence, technological difficulties, and the necessity of collaboration for the success of this inherently interdisciplinary project. The story is also evolving as the collection grows and is further organised, curated and exhibited. Over time, new intersections between expert knowledge, curatorial practice and student-generated content will be revealed.

This year, in addition to the release of the Digital Archive platform,¹ we published more than 125 student films on YouTube,² alongside 25 articles responding to the collection—the latter available on the faculty's online news site, *Precinct*.³ University staff, students and researchers, and some film industry professionals, were invited to search the archive and pick films they responded to, in order to reveal the depth and breadth of the collection. The articles were commissioned with a grant from the University of Melbourne Student Services Amenities Fund. The idea was to use the films as stimulus for creating and curating. Each writer could bring their own voice, style and edge to the project and respond to themes relevant to their own writing or research.

The articles touched on a range of themes, from death, mental illness, and social justice, through to identity and multiculturalism. In 2015, the Film School had commissioned a significance assessment of the collection, which identified its cultural, historical, political, research

and aesthetic potential. The articles show the beginnings of how this archive can be used to develop these areas of significance, and others. The participating writers produced interpretive responses to the material held in the collection, offering the audience a new insight into the maker's work, often moving beyond its original ideas and explorations. This opportunity to provide access to a body of moving-image works and encourage the creation of other works inspires collection managers to consider how they can repurpose and reimagine collections for teaching, learning, research, artistic creation, and community involvement. For this reason I have summarised 10 ways in which our writers have helped bring new life to the archive, to reach new audiences and expand its meaning.

1. Poetry

Films in the archive acted as poetic stimulus for Yvette Putra, who wrote a beautiful poem titled 'The city'. Her response was based on watching three films that featured the city of Melbourne as a backdrop: *296 Smith Street*, *Pleasure Domes*, and *Radium*. They all told stories of



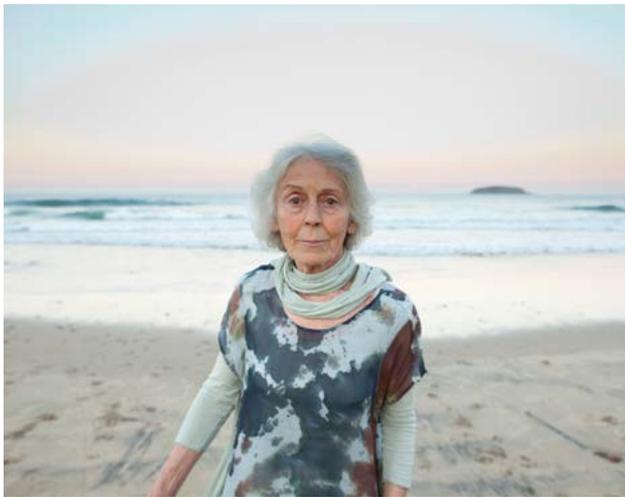
Melbourne—'the outsider, the native, the lost, the found, the sacred, the profane, the ugly, the beautiful'.⁴ Rather than focusing on one response, Yvette was interested in the elements that tied the stories together; for her, this was the desire to love the city: 'In needing to love the city, we transpose all our human emotions, and that is our folly. After all, the city is the city. Any emotion—anything more than glass and concrete—is the result of our own human traces'.⁵

2. Film reviews

Film reviews are an easy way to explore and interpret an audiovisual collection. By using themes or subjects of interest to frame film reviews, there is an opportunity to communicate a rich layer of ideas evident in an archive. In this way our writers explored films that contributed to topical conversations around the #MeToo movement, mental illness, and diversity, to name just a few.

3. Word art

One of my favourite responses was by Alice O'Rourke, the UK recipient of the 2018 International Museums and Collections Award. During her placement with the university's Museums and Collections Unit in 2018, Alice worked with the VCA Digital Archive, creating metadata and checking the quality of the films to avoid problems with the digitisation process. Alice chose two films: *All at sea* and *Bino*. Her interest was in unconventional writing styles, and so she layered text to create a 'constellation of words: the title of the film runs downwards in the middle of the image and the accompanying letters surrounding the central core letters create tangible and cohesive words to convey the theme and subject of the film'.⁶ This wonderfully creative response opened up the potential of the archive, offering an exciting and original way of exploring the collection that is both visual and poetic.



Still from Leah Sanderson's film *All at sea* (2011).

a B sent
state of m I nd
or mome N t of
c O ntent bliss?

open w A ter
f L ickers
L ike the
fl A sh
in T he
wi S e
E yes
of p A t⁷

4. Personal reflection

Writer Aaron Hughes searched the collection for queer films, and wrote four personal and honest reflective pieces that were at times confronting for the reader. Hughes described the short films as 'vignettes' and 'passion project(s) capturing a writer-filmographer's idea as a moment in time for a future audience to revisit'.⁸ The films took Aaron back to reflect on his own lived experience of being gay, and he used the films as a stimulus to communicate some of his lessons learnt.

5. Iconic moments: people, places, things

PhD researcher Victoria Perin dipped into the Digital Archive and chose films that showed the changing face of the city of Melbourne and some of its suburbs. 'Settings have their own personality. The best student films I saw activated a spirit already latent in their chosen location: a sad lounge room, a melancholic backyard, an eerie underpass. Melbourne, these films proved, is a city of feelings'.⁹ Archivist Cassandra Gorton focused on films that explored Melbourne's iconic public transport vehicle: the tram. Her article 'tracks' the representation of trams, from the time of tram conductors (known as 'connies') to the privatisation of the public transport system and subsequent public dissatisfaction.

6. 'Best of' collections

There are more than 300 short documentary films in the Digital Archive. We decided the best way to celebrate this non-fiction genre was to pick films from different categories (history, social justice, mental illness, ordinary people, and funny/quirky) and ask a documentary curator to choose films on these themes. Betty Milonas is a curator who has worked with the likes of the National Library of Australia and the Melbourne Documentary Film Festival. Her experience in bringing together a tight collection of films that best canvassed those themes was vital in helping celebrate the collection. Felix Brown, by contrast, watched more than 60 horror films and chose 10 that best represented this genre. His 'best of' list showed that horror can be more than just blood and gore.

7. Social issues

Many films in the archive are socially, culturally and politically significant; many writers were attracted to exploring further the complex themes and issues with which many film students attempt to grapple. Yvette

Still from Qiu Yang's *Under the sun* (2014), a film selected for the Cannes Film Festival.



Grant wrote an article about the 50-year history of Melbourne's public housing towers, as represented in a number of films dating back to the 1970s. Thomas Gregory discussed the representation of mental illness in film and how student films often move beyond stereotypical depictions of mental illness. Gregory has lived with bipolar disorder for more than a decade; he picked films that spoke to him about his own experiences and offered audiences different ways of seeing and understanding the myriad experiences of people living with mental illness.

8. Genres and themes

Films in the archive cover a diverse array of themes and genres. The breadth of the collection gave writers a wealth of opportunity to explore the collection according to their own interests. Writers wrote about dance films, misfits and outsiders, animation films, and the representation of the other, along with films that touched on themes of death and the afterlife, and love and joy. Budding archivist Ryan Smedley's love of musicals led him to explore this genre. He discovered that many of VCA's musical short films featured women forging a sense of identity and self through song, and his article explored these transformations.

9. Filmmaker profiles

Many student filmmakers whose early work features in the Digital Archive have gone on to contribute to our national and international screen identity. Changzhou-based filmmaker and VCA Master of Film and Television graduate Qiu Yang recently won the Leitz Cine Discovery Prize during critics' week at Cannes. We commissioned writer and researcher Duncan Caillard to write about Qiu. Duncan watched Qiu's films and interviewed him about his artistic work and career. There are many more graduates whose early work can be discovered in the archive, from

feature film director Ariel Kleiman (*Partisan*) through to Emmy award-winning cinematographer Adam Arkapaw (*Top of the lake*) and eminent television director Emma Freeman (*Glee*).

10. Short stories

Monica Raszewski is a writer of fiction and plays and an admirer of Gerald Murnane's work. In 2015, Janos Zoltan directed an award-winning short documentary about Murnane, *Secret matters*, which inspired Monica to write an imaginative response. Like the poetry and word-art pieces, Raszewski's short story, 'Girl at the window', shows how new artistic works can be created that further enrich this unique university cultural collection.



With more than 1,900 films and growing, the Digital Archive has many more themes, ideas, and genres to reveal, and will inspire the creation of many more imaginative responses. It is a rich collection that continues to develop in meaning and significance. For example, between 28 October and 22 November 2019 *Discover the Digital Archive* was held in the Old Quad building on the Parkville campus. This month-long special event gave visitors unprecedented access to the entire VCA Film and Television Digital Archive. Curated by students majoring in screen and cultural studies and Digital Archive volunteers, the exhibition also featured a special 'Old Quad' playlist.

The more the collection is explored, documented, digitised and used, the more meaningful it will become for future generations. Stay tuned for the next episode, as we continue to strengthen this university cultural collection's potential for teaching, learning, research, artistic creation and community involvement.

Below, left: Still from Tao Jia's film *Heart station* (2015).

Below, right: Still from Emma Sleath's film *Rise* (1998).



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The VCA Film and Television Archive comprises more than 1,900 short films produced between 1966 and the present day by graduating students of the School of Film and Television (part of the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne) and its predecessors. For information on the digitisation of the collection, see <https://finearts-music.unimelb.edu.au/digital-archive>.

- 1 *VCA Film and Television Digital Archive*, University of Melbourne, <https://finearts-music.unimelb.edu.au/digital-archive>.
- 2 'VCA Film & Television School', *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/channel/UCkXceh2K46CDbIJA4Ue61Tw (viewed 29 September 2019).
- 3 *Precinct: Music, Art, Stage and Screen from the University of Melbourne*, Victorian College of the Arts and Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, University of Melbourne, <https://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/vcamcm-direct/> (viewed 29 September 2019).

- 4 Yvette Putra, 'VCA Digital Archive: The city', *Precinct*, 2019, <https://precinct.finearts-music.unimelb.edu.au/2019/07/18/vca-digital-archive-the-city/> (viewed 21 July 2019).
- 5 Putra, 'VCA Digital Archive: The city'.
- 6 Alice O'Rourke, 'VCA Digital Archive: Word art', *Precinct*, 2019, <https://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/vcamcm-direct/2019/07/25/vca-digital-archive-word-art/> (viewed 21 July 2019).
- 7 O'Rourke, 'VCA Digital Archive: Word art'.
- 8 Aaron Hughes, 'VCA Digital Archive: Gay experience', 2019, *Precinct*, <https://precinct.finearts-music.unimelb.edu.au/2019/03/07/vca-digital-archive-gay-experience> (viewed 21 July 2019).
- 9 Victoria Perin, 'VCA Digital Archive: Melbourne, you're a star!', *Precinct*, 2019, <https://precinct.finearts-music.unimelb.edu.au/2019/03/28/vca-digital-archive-melbourne-youre-a-star/> (viewed 21 July 2019).