Mike Dillon

Shades of Gray: An Interview with Ross Lipman

The *"F" is for Failure* graduate student conference concluded with "Digital Subjectivity: Restoring Barbara Loden's *Wanda*," a keynote presentation by Ross Lipman, who is senior film preservationist at UCLA's Film & Television Archive. He is also an independent filmmaker. By chronicling his experience restoring Loden's *Wanda* (1970), Lipman illustrated some of the chief concerns pertaining to the restoration process generally. He outlined several challenges encountered throughout this project that point to subjective decision-making on the part of the restorationist that projects of this nature often necessitate. The presentation included numerous visual demonstrations of the specific choices he made during his restoration of *Wanda*.

Because Lipman structured his address through the use of numerous visual aids, his original text was deemed unsuitable for publication in this issue. Instead, his material was made the subject of an interview that engages several key topics germane to the original presentation and allows him to supplement his answers with anecdotes and examples that were not included in his keynote address. In what follows, Lipman discusses the importance of understanding a film's historical roots when assessing the contexts of its production and artistic intent. He also weighs in on the transition from analogue to digital media (a contested issue in some quarters of film studies) and addresses how his work informs his own sensibilities as a

filmmaker. Most notably, he expounds in detail on the subjective discernment that frequently accompanies his work and the sometimes tenuous line between restoring a damaged film and preserving its imperfect properties.

Mike Dillon: You had given your keynote presentation before to an audience of engineers and archivists, but you deliberately retained some of its technical jargon for our people in Critical Studies to bridge the gaps between scientific and critical/artistic discourses. What are some of the concrete ways in which a working knowledge of technical or scientific terminology can benefit critical or historical approaches?

Ross Lipman: I'd say it's more than just a question of terminology, but also technical concepts, in that artists are often—in my experience—struggling not just with content but with form. The two things are often very interwoven. Much of what characterizes individual artworks is wrapped up in the way in which they were made. Having a deeper understanding of those multiple processes only enlightens the understanding of the discourses that go on around them.

The idea is that a lot of artists' struggles are wrapped up in their material and the way that they work with that material. You'll find some who may work exclusively with material and

others who work more in the realm of content. But there usually is some kind of dialogue going on between content and material, and sometimes misunderstandings arise when the community that is receiving the work does not have a deeper understanding of the production context. That becomes even more challenging with older works as time passes. When works are current, there's generally an assumption that most people who will be perceiving or receiving them have at least a general familiarity with the environment in which the works are made and maybe even some of the processes by which they are made. But that recedes with time.

My favorite example of this is *The Exiles* (1961), by Kent Mackenzie—a good USC boy, of course—who made that film out on location. One of the things *The Exiles* is renowned for is the amazing location cinematography by Erik Daarstad, John Morrill, and Robert Kaufman. And while the cinematography is remarkable, one thing that's fluctuating a bit throughout the film is the sound. Although they did record sound on location, they only were able to use those recordings as guide tracks. The quality was often poor, and they redubbed the dialogue in the studio, so that what you're hearing is not location sound; it's ADR, added later. Some people look at that as a flaw. There are voices from some quarters saying, "If not for the poor quality of the dubbed dialogue, this would be a better film." What does not enter into the discourse that I've seen is a discussion of the historical context in which *The Exiles* was produced. And what's key to understanding this is the time it was being shot, between 1957-1959. That's really at a moment just preceding *cinéma vérité*. The Nagra III sound recorder was just then being developed. There were certainly Nagra models out, but the technology had not been perfected yet. It was only in the early 1960s, a little later, that you really began getting that portable, high-quality sound equipment functional. Part of what Mackenzie was doing was anticipating *cinéma vérité* before it happens, but without the technology that would enable it. When you get into it and you look at what he actually did do with the sound, there are some really innovative things that he achieved, and some work brilliantly, while others are less successful. Overall, it's brilliant.
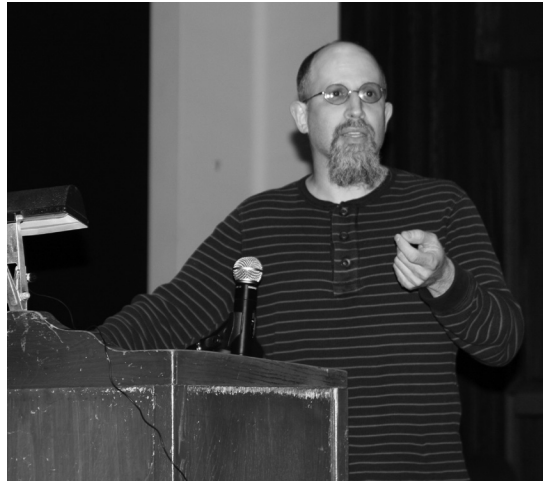
Ross Lipman delivers his keynote address at *"F" is for Failure.*

But the key thing is that understanding the historical moment of the development of cinema technology around *The Exiles* helps you understand Mackenzie's creative process.

MD: Speaking of cinema technology, let's talk about "medium specificity." This is a commonplace term in our field. Am I paraphrasing you correctly to say that medium specificity is often historically specific, because it is so wrapped up in what technology is available to the medium at the time?

RL: Yes, but then I would say that technology is always changing, and some of those shifts are smaller and others more seismic. So, for example, when you go from photochemical to electronic imaging systems, that's a huge shift. They do tend to inch closer once you start getting towards a really high-quality digital cinema environment, but there are still many, many differences. And a lot of it depends on the success of their implementation. So it's a really slippery slope. Let's say you're doing a restoration of an older film, and you keep it in the film medium, with a photochemical workflow. By definition, that would be closer to retaining medium specificity than if you were to translate it into an electronic imaging system. However, one could also say, "It's not truly medium-specific unless you printed it on the actual film stock on which it was originally printed." I would argue that there's really no way you're going to get everything perfectly identical to an original production. It's

always being changed in one way or another. You cannot duplicate something perfectly. One would think that, digitally, you can. I would say that it's *always* being changed, and it's a question of how much.

In general, I think it is better to try to retain the original medium's physical properties, such as keeping it photochemical. Having said that, one can print film really poorly also, and so it depends on the nature of the work. Some films will just not make the leap from analogue to digital very happily. Others can do it quite well, and in some cases you can arguably do *better* by going digital. A theme you'll hear me come back to all the time is that every project is its own story, and what works in one case will not necessarily work in another. You always have to begin anew with each project. One of the questions I ask is, "Is the work's meaning embedded in its physical properties? How much of that is vital to this particular work?" And then, you have to ask, "What's going to happen when those properties no longer exist or just aren't there? How is that going to change the nature of the work?" A lot of people today don't even see a difference between media forms. It's all just one thing, and they won't think about those issues.

MD: How much of your restoration work is performed with consideration of how the media will be projected or screened for audiences once you're done with it? Is the original intended screening environment taken into account?

RL: Absolutely. I'm always having to ask myself how a film might be presented. Now, that's all well and good, but in the long run, I'm going to have very little say over the matter. Once the film leaves my hands, or anybody's hands, a lot of the decisions come down to whoever's operating the projection booth. I'm always trying to implement ways to send as much information as possible with our works when they go out in any form, to make sure that the screening venues' technical people know how the work should be presented. But the fact is, this is really difficult. Our shipping department ships prints in and out all day. We have a whole staff that just deals with print booking, and keeping track of all that information for the thousands of titles in our collection is beyond what

they can do. I, thankfully, only have to worry about the handful of titles that I've worked on. There's a question of what we hope for, and what's really going to happen. You have to accept the fact that at a certain point you can't control it. It's going to be viewed however it will.

For example, if we preserve a silent film, it might have a particular "ideal" projection speed. Of course, that's intensely debatable in itself and would depend on the work—you might even have multiple ideal projection speeds within a single film because they would have been hand-cranked in the silent era. And so, with silent films, you have no say of what's really going to happen once it gets out there. It might be the projectionist who decides on it. Another classic area for varied presentation of a single title is aspect ratio, because although a lot of films blown up from 16mm were exhibited in a rectangular 1.85:1, they might have been shot in a more square 1.33:1. And so the projectionist will look at the material and make a call, sometimes based on the date of production. Good projectionists know a lot—they can be great resources. Other times, I'll have friendly debates with them: "No, I think with this title we should not base our decision on the fact that it was shot in 1966, but from what we know about this production."

MD: You raise interesting points about what you call "digital subjectivity"—this was the title of your original keynote address—arguing that, contrary to the pristine qualities that digital has a reputation for, there's actually a great deal of subjectivity involved in what you do and in how digital technology is put into effect during the preservation and restoration processes. You've elsewhere called this the "Gray Zone."[1] Can you talk about this?

RL: I would loosely say that the Gray Zone is the space one enters when a straightforward work path is not obvious. When there is not a clear way to proceed in preserving or restoring something, you have to make choices, and suddenly, worlds of possibility open, and you have to find your own way from there again. That's the Gray Zone. Now, when one discusses digital media, the prevailing view, still to this day, is, "Oh, it's all mathematical.

When you make a digital copy of something, it's always the same. And it's preserved." This is a myth that I encounter frequently.

First, I would say that all digital flavors are not the same. Just like everything else, they change. All you have to do is work with Final Cut Pro—one time—and then try to export your file. You'll immediately have so many export codecs to choose from that it can be bewildering to a non-professional. There's a new codec being developed every day for some purpose or another, and all of those codecs transcode the digital data differently. Each time you transcode it again, it changes further. So unless you're working with purely uncompressed files, the numbers are changing. And the changing numbers reflect a change in the image, whether you're seeing it or not.

MD: In particular, then, it seems like the misconception about digital that you take issue with is its reputation for "sameness" and infinite replicability.

RL: That's one of them, yes. Surprisingly, this question is glossed over by amateurs and professionals alike. "You didn't know that the image actually changes when you do that?" Just as photochemical manipulation of an image determines its appearance, there are all sorts of factors in the digital realm that you need to be cognizant of, and work with, to maintain image quality, especially as you move it through different environments and formats. There often aren't clear technical parameters on *how* the image is changing. If you talk to ten different engineers about certain problems, you're likely to get ten different answers. That's because there are so many flavors out there; I have yet to meet someone who has a bead on everything. There are some who are really good, and they are the ones I want to work with.

In the digital world, then, you encounter a set of questions that parallels analogue work, which involves having to navigate your own path, with your decisions. It's the Gray Zone all over again: you're not in some mathematical world of perfection, where you're free from choice because everything is the same. It depends on who you are, of course. Some people may not want to bother

with all of this, but for others, it's where they live. We live in that state of perpetual choice.

MD: With so much of the media out there undergoing this process of digital conversion, what are your responsibilities in making sure the original intent of the artist is respected and the work retains its specificity during the process of conversion? How difficult is this process, given how often you encounter subjective valuations keeping you in that Gray Zone?

RL: For many years, there was a real stridency in both the photochemical and digital camps, wherein the film camp was saying, "Digital stinks. It's just a lot of hype and misses the magic of photochemical cinema." And the digital people would say, "C'mon, people, get with the program. It's going to happen whether you like it or not. Let's just show film the door and move into the modern world." I used to encounter that split all the time. For better or for worse, we're now a few years further down the line, and the digital camp has essentially won—if you want to put it in terms of "success" or "failure" from a historical perspective, rather than a "pure" quality perspective. The historical moment of photochemical cinema seems to be receding.

I would say, however, that stridency on either side is not helpful. The fact is, each medium is slightly different; each has its own characteristics and properties, and then you'll find infinite flavors within that. For example, if you print onto two different film stocks, you're going to find unique properties in those film stocks, which can work well with some material and work less well with others. There's a whole artistry just in knowing that. Likewise, there are countless flavors of digital that one has to work with every day. So when someone says, "Digital is fantastic!" that's just a load of hooey. It *can* be. But it can also be a mess, just like anything else. The same goes for photochemical. My job is to navigate the different permutations and possibilities and find a path that takes a work from the past into the present historical moment in a way that's faithful to the essence of what that work was and is.

If the work is going to move into a new historical moment, it's not just from the past anymore. It's now a part of the present. While

certain things remain the same, certain things change as the work moves through time, just like people change as they move through time: you're the same person that you were five years ago, and yet you've also changed. A work is similar—it's not locked in stone the way that people think. It exists through the perceptions of people around it, which change. I would say that the transformation from photochemical to digital imaging can be profound. But it can also be absolutely transformative and utter destructive.

I often find myself wrestling with questions that make people ask, "Why are you worrying about that little thing? It doesn't make a difference." And yet, in my little world, the difference between Method X and Method Y can be huge, even if few others see it. But there's a faith that, even if no one knows it, the work will be better because of that small little thing that you tried to do.

MD: Do you have a guiding set of principles in terms of restoring a work to its original moment while at the same time understanding that it is being brought into a new historical moment, in your phrasing? Or is it really on an individual basis, depending on the particular work?

RL: You choose your words well by saying "principles." One point on which I tend to vary from a lot of archivists is the codification of ethics. There's an ongoing debate within our community over whether to create a code of ethics or set of rules by which to operate. I think you can make whatever code you like, but in the real world, things are going to fluctuate. Of course, that's not an excuse for going ahead and doing anything— you do have to have something you're striving for and things to help steer you along your path. But I like the word "principle" because it doesn't sound binding. In the end, the most basic principle that I return to is that *the work has to guide you*. And the path will be different for each work. So what works for one film might not work for another, even if you think they would be almost identical in their demands.

A good example of this would be two of the Kenneth Anger films that I worked on, *Scorpio Rising* (1964) and *Kustom Kar Kommandos* (1970). They were shot within about a year of

each other, on the exact same film stock, by the same filmmaker, in a somewhat similar vein, in that *Scorpio Rising* is all about gay biker cults and *Kustom Kar Kommandos* takes a similar approach to custom cars. So, a very close set of guidelines there: same period, same film stock, same filmmaker, same general theme. And yet, I still found that I had to print them differently because *Kustom Kar Kommandos* was shot with a softer lighting style and color palette that resulted in a more pastel look and an attendant romanticization. *Scorpio Rising*, ultimately, has a much harsher depiction of the world it's showing, prompting the use of stronger colors and higher contrast. The ways we printed the films therefore varied subtly. We took different approaches to the chemical processing of the film stock, yet no one would ever really know the difference. Hopefully, you would think they look really nice—but you wouldn't know that we had done this backchannel work in the chemistry department to get them to look slightly different.

MD: Continuing with your Kenneth Anger example, to what extent does what we tend to call an "auteur analysis" come into play? To what extent does an understanding of the filmmaker him or herself come into play when you assess what the film's original intent may have been?

RL: Almost always, I would say. Those are certainly some of the questions that I'm bearing in mind with every single work. In some cases, I might know more or less about a particular filmmaker and the historical moment that informs the work. Of course, everyone's going to have his or her stronger areas of historical knowledge and areas of lesser strength—that's no different for me than anyone else. But those questions are absolutely brought into every single project.[2]

MD: Is there ever a conflict between your impulse to restore a film's existing imperfections in a certain manner and the original intentions of the filmmaker?

RL: Yes. My starting point, unlike some others, is acknowledging that you will *not* be able to duplicate something perfectly—that something will be changed merely by the fact of its being

replicated. That's an important distinction. The basic principle of film preservation and restoration is that you are making new copies—at least, based on photochemical notions of the terms. I start from the standpoint that you are changing things whether you know it or not. I have two clips from John Cassavetes' *Faces* (1968) that I show, one of our restoration and one of an existing print made by a studio a few years back. (They re-mastered and released the film.) When I went to restore it years after the studio did their work, I got a hold of the original sound recordings, along with older copies of the film, and so on. Now, Cassavetes' films, especially the early ones, were often made in very rough conditions, and a lot of their dialogue was originally hard to distinguish in the showprints. And yet, when you go back to the original recordings, there's a little bit more there that's audible. So you have the question of, "Okay, are you supposed to slavishly emulate the showprint of a film from the time of its original release, which might have, frankly, been a substandard rendering of the original itself? Or do you go back to the original recordings with the knowledge that there's something more there that you might pry out?" In the case of the studio, they had tried to improve the audibility of *Faces*' dialogue by boosting the high frequency of the soundtrack and dropping out some of the lower frequencies. I have clips that demonstrate that they'd unknowingly removed background traffic noise in the process of clearing up the sound. You could hear the *dialogue* a little better in their version than the older prints, but you lost some of the surrounding atmosphere.

What I did with John Polito, the brilliant audio restorationist at Audio Mechanics, was go back to the original recordings. We just did little, subtle things in the sound room to try to make the dialogue more clear, but we also wanted to retain some of the background noise of the traffic and the overall *feel* of the original. So we were definitely changing it from how it sounded originally—as were the people who went before us, and as will almost anybody who goes back and does any future work with the film after us. The point is that we were navigating that same path—hopefully consciously—and trying to do something with the film that was faithful to the original, yet also carrying it into its next incarnation.

MD: On the matter of recognizing a work in its historical moment while also understanding that you are bringing that work into a new historical moment—to what extent does this necessitate being sensitive to changing standards of taste? More specifically, talk about changing standards of taste regarding production value. When do a film's aesthetic or technical failures, due to a lack of budget and resources in the case of independent film, become something you are obligated to preserve in the restoration process?

RL: A good example, of course, would be *Wanda*. Although my presentation demonstrated things like dirt removal, you have to remember that those were isolated instances. With *Wanda*, in general, we left most of the flaws intact. In fact, for each thing that we went in and changed, we had a specific reason why we were allowing that detail to be changed and not another. We were changing the work in small ways that you would never know about, but, on the other hand, we were leaving large swaths of things exactly as they were.

I work in both analogue and digital, but I work in film more than many people still do, and in film we're more accustomed to living with and seeing dirt. Badly placed dirt distracts me as much as it does anyone else, but moderate dirt, I'm not as concerned with. I tend to be very concerned with things like image contrast, shades of lightness and darkness, color grading, tonality—those are areas where I get very heavily invested, where I work closely.

Say we were sending *Wanda* out for digital mastering to a high-quality lab or a top-tier distributor like Criterion, and they were doing their own video mastering without us archivists in the picture. They would be removing a heck of a lot more dirt and things than I would normally be doing. Different ends of the industry tend to prioritize different things. People who are looking at DVDs are generally used to seeing things that are dirt-free and will be really upset about dirt particles and things like that. On the other hand, when you're in the digital world, you're not controlling how people are viewing things at home. When someone buys a DVD, you've got no control over how they're going to set their home monitor. Forget it; conditions are all over

the map. That comes back to your earlier question about screening environments. I'm still going to do everything I can to optimize the work for an ideal situation, bearing in mind that it might not always be seen that way.

Regarding changing standards of taste: you can't help but respond to the moment that you're in. But at the same time, I try to be aware of what's merely fashion and not particularly cater to that. An example of this might be *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984), the documentary that was the inspiration for the Gus Van Sant feature in 2008. When that film was made, a large portion of it consisted of video-to-film transfers. There were TV spots and so on that had originally lived in video and were transferred to film using the technology that was available in 1984. Now, Rob Epstein, the film's director, wanted to redo the transfers for our restoration—meaning, although we would not have been changing the film's content, we would have been potentially upgrading how those images would be rendered in the final output. We wound up doing several different tests, including some with a company that was highly regarded by independent filmmakers at the time—it shall not be named. The main difference between the two primary technologies being compared was not so much sharpness. It turned out to be a contrast boost in the more fashionable technology circa 1999. But rather than just say, "Okay, we're trying to update this for 1999 by using the more fashionable technology," I was looking at the substance of the movie. There were certain scenes for which the new technology worked well, but there were more, far more, instances in which the film looked better using the 1984 transfers, which were more in keeping with the source material.

For example, we worked with TV footage of a close-up of Diane Feinstein's face that had a deep subtlety to it. She's speaking at a very emotional moment, and you can see more of the nuances. There were problems, for sure, with the original 1984 transfer, but despite those problems, the lower contrast image retained more of the qualities of her facial expressions, which had somehow gotten lost in the contrast-boosted new transfers. On the other hand, later in the film, there are some scenes of rioting, with parts of San Francisco in flames, and those really looked great in high contrast. It just added a small hint of dramatic emphasis. I'm talking about nearly indiscernible things here; I would have to literally put them side-by-side in a controlled environment and walk you through a demonstration for you to see the differences. The point is that, in each case, I was letting the material guide me along the path rather than imposing some agenda on it to update it for the prevailing standards of 1999. Updating for 1999 wasn't in my mind in the slightest, but by the process of merely doing the work, I was, in fact, doing that anyway, to some extent.[3]

MD: Can you talk about—and this ties back into our earlier topic about interdisciplinary approaches in the academy—the extent to which a working knowledge of, or even a professional background in, film production helps with preservation and restoration? How valuable is that in determining which of a film's potential failures or imperfections are the result of filmmaker intent?

RL: One advantage that I have is that my background as a filmmaker is not just in production; it's also in post-production. And by post-production here, I don't just mean editing. I mean the laboratory end of things. I was fortunate to get some very good laboratory training in my mid-twenties. That was part of my filmmaking, and it's where a lot of this work started to happen for me. There was a critical background, too—I don't want to underestimate that. That was the third part of the cocktail.

In independent cinema, in which I do a lot of restoration work, you'll find filmmakers with varying areas of expertise in different aspects of production. Some people might be focusing on editorial work, some might be working on the back-end, some might be concerned with what's happening in front of the camera—all sorts of things. But only very rarely do you find independent filmmakers who are deeply versed in laboratory procedures. Of course, you do find them, but with independent cinema, there's so much work that goes into just getting the films to exist in the first place. By the time you get to the laboratory, there's usually very little money left over. The large part of the artist's creative energies went into shooting and editing, and the lab work is often an afterthought.

Once there, you have decisions being made even though the artist is only marginally involved, or sometimes not at all. You have decisions being made that affect how the film will be perceived in the world by laboratory technicians who might be very good but, in some cases, may not have an investment in that particular film. Yet that's how the films come down to us.

I feel lucky to have a film production background and also some knowledge of laboratory procedures, so I can get a sense of whether something is actually an area of concern for the artist. I can say, "This doesn't seem to be a point of focus. Let's call them—if they're alive—and ask some questions." If they're not around, then it gets further into the Gray Zone and I need to make my own, interpretive guesses: "Yes, this is an area in which I should be intervening and trying to finesse more detail out of the material than was originally seen in the prints," or "No, let's just leave it that way."

MD: You used the word "intervening" there. Can you speak to that? On the one hand, you are trying to restore and repair damage and degradation to a film, yet, on the other, you are obliged to respect the film's original format. I assume the semantic differences between "intervening," "fixing," and "improving" are very important.

RL: I should add another side-point there. I was careful to say "changing," not "improving" — although one could argue that we are, I suppose. A lot of the films I work with, if printed poorly in their original release, might actually have more detail in the original negative than made it into the positive copies projected in theaters. So, with a particular title, one might say, "Yes, the negative is our reference here. We're not going to emulate the prints. We're going to bring out more detail from the original." The thing to understand is that we're not adding detail that wasn't there already. We're merely rendering it in a more articulated way.

Naturally, there are "shades of gray" in the way one changes things. So you have to repeatedly ask that question—"Is it desirable to make the change?" We've all encountered situations in which people have gone overboard. You can do things that will make something completely different from what it was before. You don't want to let the power of the technology seduce you into overdoing it, lest you over-treat a film and lose something of its essence in the process.

MD: Let's talk about your own work as an experimental filmmaker. You stated during your keynote that your films often feature themes of urban ruin, based primarily on a general interest you have in decay and detritus. What is it about decay that fascinates you as an artist?

RL: Decay and ruins are these wonderful reminders that everything is passing—that the present moment is always slipping into the past. The ruins of what came before remind us that it will happen to us one day—that we're passing, too. There's something beautiful in the sense of something disappearing that heightens our perception of it and also of the present. It brings us into the moment of feeling alive through the very sense of transience. It heightens our awareness of something that's occurring quite naturally, even as we speak. Decay points to that and can evoke that sense of loss, even as we're experiencing something.

MD: Your interest in recording these states of decay begs the question of whether there is a link between these artistic interests and your expertise in film restoration. Is it too obvious to suggest a connection between your own experimental work and the types of degradation you encounter professionally when restoring a film?

RL: I used to try to keep those two areas of endeavor separate, but I'm beginning to understand how they relate to each other more and more. Of course, that's continually evolving, too. I would say that in some ways, decay is a baseline that I flutter around, and sometimes I'm trying to preserve things and sometimes I'm happily letting them rot away. I might be working on a restoration of an old film and, depending on what film it is, be much more interested in the decay patterns than in the film itself (laughs). The content, which might be more interesting to some from a historical point of view, melts away and I'm just looking at patterns of random decay in abstraction and happily living in that world. Then, of course, I'll still have to go

back and try to preserve the film for the reason we're supposedly preserving it. In my own work, I tend to gravitate toward that same baseline again, to the point whereby you're recovering something but also watching as it fades away in front of you.

MD: To what extent is it a question of recognizing the need, sometimes, to just let something decay? To understand or accept the fact that not everything can be preserved or restored?

RL: That's a topic I almost dare not bring up. We're so busy in the archival community trying to save things that we don't always have time to breathe and say, "Well, look, maybe we don't really need to preserve *everything*." That's certainly my view. There's just too much out there. Even ignoring the past—if you just go to the present moment, there have probably been more media works completed in the hour that we've been having this conversation than I would be able to preserve in my lifetime. How many YouTube posts have just gone up since we've been speaking? Forget it. And yet, despite that obvious, staggering reality, in the archival world, bless us, the more common approach would be to say, "My God, it's all going to disappear if we don't do something. It's all going to be lost." Well, that's true, and I understand and deeply appreciate that impulse. At the same time, however, part of me loves the futility of it. I love the futility of archiving.

For me, there's a tremendous paradox in preservation, in that even our preservations are time-based. People are going to be revisiting them in the future. More and more, as time has passed, I've been viewing it as a kind of performance work. Yes, we're calling it preservation and restoration—and we're certainly helping things to live longer—but, in reality, it's still going to wash away. Some things will stick longer and other things won't. It's all just passing. For me, the restoration component is, in essence, making new artworks. That's part of why I like it. I'm really just making things all the time. It's a different nature of work than making my own films, since my own works allow me complete freedom to do whatever I like. When I'm doing a restoration project, there are certain guidelines. But in each case, I let the *project* tell *me* what to do. So, in that sense, they're alike. When I'm making

my own film, the film has to tell me how it wants to be made; likewise, when I'm doing a restoration, that film has to tell me how it wants to be restored. They're slightly different questions, and I respond to them in different ways. I might do something with a restoration that I would never do in my own work and vice versa. I literally have a different set of operations for each case. I'm very much invested in an artisanal and artistic approach to restoration.

MD: Are the institutions you work for generally supportive of that philosophy?

RL: Considering my restoration work an art practice requires a certain approach. I don't function well when I have to produce mass quantities of work. The studios tend to come up with names like "asset manager" for our positions, which, by definition, suggests a different organizational approach. They often have to focus on large back-catalogues of productions. It's not terrible—the studios have great people working for them who will definitely target their pet projects, and they really do a bang up job on those. But they've got so many titles that it's hard to get deeply invested in more than a few. In other situations, they're dependent on sending the films off to the labs and hoping that the labs will do good work—which they usually do. One advantage of working at a not-for-profit like UCLA is that I don't always have the quantity demands that, say, my studio counterparts would. I, to a large extent, am able—or, touch wood, have been able—to really hone in and work with the titles artisanally. That means that we're carefully selecting a handful of projects and doing the very best we can on those. Other archives might have a different model, whereby they save and duplicate as much footage as possible. It's a different set of challenges and tasks. And that's great too—both models serve their purpose. I certainly wouldn't say that what I do is better or more important. But that's really where I live and it's the space I care about: those honed, selected projects with which I can help create an artwork, or work in a way that helps bring that artwork into the present moment, by selection. If certain things pass along the way, well, hopefully they'll fall to some of the organizations that are better suited for dealing with large quantities. But if not, that's what happens. Loss is part of what we live with, day to day.

End Notes

1 Ross Lipman, "The Gray Zone: A Restorationist's Travel Guide," *The Moving Image* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2009), 1-29.

2 Lipman elaborates on the topic of communicating with filmmakers during a restoration process in: Ross Lipman, "Problems of Independent Film Preservation," *Journal of Film Preservation* 25, no. 53 (1996), 49 -58.

3 More on the potential importance of retaining traces of low-budget productions are offered in Lipman's narration of the documentary "The Restoration of John Cassavetes' *Shadows*" (Claire Didier, "The Restoration of John Cassavetes' *Shadows,*" in *John Cassavetes: Five Films* [DVD set], The Criterion Collection, 2004).