

THE JOHN D. AND CATHERINE T.

MAR 15 1993

MACARTHUR FOUNDATION

MOTION PICTURE, BROADCASTING
AND RECORDED SOUND DIVISION

**Comment for the
National Film Preservation Board
from the
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
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As a private foundation whose mission is to encourage and support activities for the improvement of democracy, social justice, peace and the environment, we welcome this opportunity to respond to the request for information regarding film preservation and the establishment of a comprehensive national film preservation plan. For more than six years the MacArthur Foundation has supported media centers across the country in their efforts to enhance the democratic process through the production, distribution, and exhibition of independently produced film and video works. Although preservation has been just one component of this program, we feel strongly about the need to preserve this independent work and urge that it be a part of the emerging national preservation plan.

Film is at once an art form, a means to document history, a popular-culture artifact, a corporate asset, and a unique medium for the communication of ideas and information. Our concern lies within this latter function, with films produced independently from the commercial entertainment industry, films the foremost purpose of which is to educate and inform rather than to generate box office income. This category of work includes social issue documentaries, community-based filmmaking, and films of personal expression and formal experimentation.

Unfortunately these works, which often suffer from inadequate production and distribution support, also face a problematic long-term future. Archivists are now aware that triacetate film (the standard film base in use since the early 1950s) faces preservation problems as severe as those which confront nitrate film. In addition, because individual filmmakers generally cannot afford to make duplicate prints or even to pay for adequate storage for their original materials, their works are at particular risk. Independent works tend to disappear from distribution more rapidly than films produced by the entertainment industry. It is consequently these works that are most likely to be lost unless steps are taken now to ensure their preservation.

An important first step in devising a strategy to preserve independent film is a coordinated and comprehensive information-gathering effort aimed at locating independently produced film materials, whether in archival collections, with distributors, in laboratories, or in the hands of filmmakers. We understand that such a project is underway through the National Moving Image Database (of the National Center for Film and Video Preservation at AFI), in conjunction with the Association of Moving Image Archivists and the National Alliance of Media Arts and Culture. Collaborative projects such as this are vital to the preservation effort.

We urge therefore that the emerging national film preservation plan:

1. Include independent film as worthy of preservation under the plan.
2. Recognize the efforts of those archives and institutions currently preserving independent film.
3. Recognize and encourage projects aimed at the gathering and sharing of information.
4. Recognize that efforts to preserve independent film require support from a wide variety of sources, public and private.
5. Ensure that, once preserved, these works will be made available to the broad general public, and not just to scholars and producers. This is especially important with respect to regional and community-generated film.

We appreciate this opportunity to participate in this important effort and would be glad to be of further assistance.