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Toward a National Plan for Film Preservation

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As mandated by the National Film Preservation Act of 1992, public hearings are being held in Los Angeles to assist the Librarian of Congress in preparing a comprehensive National Report on the the current state of American film preservation. These hearings represent the best hope that at long last the archives may find the financial means required to rescue our endangered moving image heritage.

Testimony will be heard today from a wide range of archival and industry representatives, reflecting a broad diversity of viewpoints. In my own testimony, I choose to focus on those elements that must be included in any National Plan if it is to achieve consensus among a wide plurality of participants.

Without elaborating on the principled justification for each of these eight points, I would like summarize them as crucial to the public debate on preservation that will surely ensue.

1. WHY PRESERVE? In order to present the most compelling case as to why film should be saved, we must recognize that motion pictures have been more than entertainment for this century. They are at once: art form, historical document, cultural artifact, market commodity, political force and omnipresent aspect of popular culture. Thus, in answering such key questions as what should be prioritized for preservation, who should do it, and how preserved films should be made accessible, we must take into account the widest array of potential users including historians, sociologists, film critics, film students, economists, social planners and public interest groups.

2. THE NATIONAL FILM COLLECTION: In the United States, the National Film Collection is held and preserved at a variety of institutions, philosophically diverse and geographically dispersed, which work together in a spirit of cooperation and common purpose. The National Plan to be prepared by the Librarian of Congress must respond to the broad needs of all of these institutions.

3. FINANCIAL PLAN: Given the enormity of the challenge and the urgency with which it must be addressed, the bottom line of the National Plan must be a financial bottom line--an innovative plan to cover the costs of preservation level at a level commensurate with the scale of the problem. Well-meaning statements of concern are no longer sufficient.

4. "ORPHAN FILMS": Government agencies have special responsibility for rescuing films held in public institutions that otherwise would find no commercial funding. In particular, the National Plan must take account of endangered newsreels and documentaries.

5. THE PARTNERSHIP: A truly comprehensive approach to preservation must be premised on fostering an active partnership bringing together the archives, the film industry, government, foundations, the creative community and philanthropic individuals. The "them" vs. "us" mentality of the past must become "we."

6. NEW TECHNOLOGIES: While avoiding quick fixes that will be regretted later, archivists should welcome the role that new media technologies, particularly the digital revolution, are likely to play in providing new and even radical solutions to old problems.

7. ACCESS: The goals of preservation and access to the holdings are symbiotically intertwined. Preservation without access is dead storage; access without preservation is destructively short-sighted.

8. TELEVISION: While the immediate goal of the National Plan focuses solely on film, in the long run a truly comprehensive plan must take into account the daunting challenges of television and video preservation.