

# **An Introduction to the University of Notre Dame's Wagstaff Digital Archive of Italian Film**

by  
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"Here we have a man who has to gather the day's refuse in the capital city. Everything that the big city threw away, everything it lost, everything that it despised, everything he crushed underfoot, he catalogues and collects."

~ Baudelaire, comments on the rag-picker

In the spring of 2017, The University of Notre Dame opens the Wagstaff Digital Archive of Italian Film.<sup>1</sup> The archive is built around roughly 2,000 Italian films and television programs donated from the personal collection of Professor Christopher Wagstaff (University of Reading, UK). Originally copied to VHS and DVD from Italian television, these films have been digitized and are being organized into a searchable, viewable interface. Both digital and commercial copies are supplemented by the university's large print collection housed in Hesburgh Library that explores the history, culture, and aesthetics of Italian media. Together, this marriage of visual with written resources aims to produce a center for the study of Italian film and television that will be open to scholars and students. These are just the initial building blocks of what will become a North American *cineteca* at Notre Dame, the first of its kind, capable of supporting extant research while promoting future projects in Italian screen studies.

As the archive's first curator (2013-2014), I was privy to the initial phases of design and construction that brought together a team from the Department of Romance

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<sup>1</sup> For inquiries about holdings or visiting the Wagstaff Digital Archive of Italian Film, please contact Tracy Bergstrom ([tbergstr@nd.edu](mailto:tbergstr@nd.edu)), Co-Program Director of Digital Library Initiatives and Scholarship, University of Notre Dame.

Languages and Literatures, Hesburgh Library Special Collections, and faculty at the University of Reading. The multi-step process of implementation that has taken place since 2013 demonstrates the importance of institutional, financial, and personal investment that are fundamental to a digital humanities (DH) project of this scope. In this brief paper, I will describe how the main features of the archive can be situated within an evolving scholarly discussion on building and maintaining film collections in the digital age. I will explain how the Wagstaff Archive both emulates and departs from the traditional film archive. Rather than underwrite the problematic discourse on the unlimited potential of Big Data to revolutionize DH, here, I will suggest a far more delimited perspective; one that esteems a collection built upon the personal tastes of a single expert.

Traditionally, the film archive is bound by its role to preserve and protect the cinematic artifacts under its care, usually analog films.<sup>2</sup> The vow to safeguard works from deterioration contours curatorial priorities, which place preservation above accessibility. Admission is constrained: the periodic film series, in which selections of works are exhibited, is the primary means by which archival materials are shared with the public; scholarly entrance is granted on a case-by-case basis, with certain institutional barriers erected to guarantee responsible use. Such restrictions to access that are attendant

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<sup>2</sup> For an introduction to issues of digital film archiving, begin with Adelheid Heftberger's 2014 article, "Film Archives and Digital Humanities - an impossible match?" <http://ojs.statsbiblioteket.dk/index.php/mediekultur/article/viewFile/16487/17534>

to notions of archival protection do not exist in digital holdings like the Wagstaff Archive. Although digital technologies have revolutionized film preservation, the Wagstaff Archive's mission is not to preserve individual films, but to permit the study of a corpus of cinematic works facilitated by their digitization. In this light, the Wagstaff Archive can be located at the intersection point of at least three key categories that are relevant for digital film archiving today. Firstly, the Wagstaff Archive is housed at a physical location in Hesburgh Library, not online, where it will nurture research, screenings, curated film series, and scholarly events. Secondly, the information system used to organize, search, and access the digital materials is designed to enhance research goals by flagging materials within the archive itself. Thirdly, the archive perpetuates Christopher Wagstaff's original vision to expand our understanding of Italian cinema through the study of *all* types of Italian media production. A brief presentation of these three elements will aid in understanding potential uses for the Wagstaff Archive as well as pondering how it might contribute to the field of Italian digital humanities.

To begin with the archive's location, the choice to place the collection at Notre Dame represents a first step in renovating the traditional cinematheque. Rooting the archive in a concrete space may seem at odds with DH's goal of placing all materials online to maximize their accessibility to the greatest number of users. Regrettably, the Wagstaff Archive will never be an italo-centric Netflix or a comprehensive Italian-language version of viewable online collections like the one dedicated to director Akira Kurosawa.<sup>3</sup> Legal constraints prohibit the university from making the digitized films available online. Still, there are considerable benefits to housing the archive in a physical

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<sup>3</sup> All of Kurosawa's works are now freely accessible online, albeit only in Japanese. <http://www.afc.ryukoku.ac.jp/Komon/kurosawa/index.html>

rather than virtual space. Designating a place dedicated to the study of Italian cinema and television should provide new opportunities for scholars at various levels of academic rank. In an era when new online networks make face-to-face encounters more and more outmoded, multi-use hosting locations that promote interpersonal scholarly interaction can be crucial for “reclaiming conversation.”<sup>4</sup> The goal is to mix experts in the field with younger generations of scholars by providing travel grants, scholarships, and visiting fellowships to travel to South Bend and take advantage of the archive. This will nourish an intellectual landscape with collaboration, promoting the design and execution of projects onsite that will have applications elsewhere.

Moving next to the archive’s unique data system, film selections are currently arranged through a “first wave”<sup>5</sup> data-based interface that organizes an array of tokens, or pieces of film meta-data, attached to each holding. The ability to view Italian films both iconic and rare without traveling to Italy will likely be the most attractive characteristic of this archive. Yet, the film collection will be buttressed by relevant filmographic information that can be organized and categorized according to the desires of the researcher. Still in development, the goal is that each film be networked with Italian cinema at large (as in [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)), but also within the archive itself: indicators can point scholars to materials held onsite that can be viewed and consulted immediately.<sup>6</sup> The potential to expand this model to embrace a new interface is impressive, as in the

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<sup>4</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015)

<sup>5</sup> This would be a first step in organizing these materials that, according to “A Digital Humanities Manifesto” will lead to more advanced and transdisciplinary applications. See: <http://manifesto.humanities.ucla.edu/2008/12/15/digital-humanities-manifesto/>

<sup>6</sup> In this respect, it will be similar to the BFI catalogue, in which searches highlight, but are not limited to, onsite holdings. See: <http://collections-search.bfi.org.uk/web>

SPA-ARK case, where real-time connections between streaming and database unfold simultaneously within a “visual browser”.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, the Wagstaff Archive could grow contiguously to many projects dedicated to "cinematics," where new forms and sources of data accompany traditional means of film analysis.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the assemblage of these diverse film titles, spanning from the silent era to the present day, reflects the primary materials of Dr. Wagstaff’s evolving intellectual engagement with Italian cinema. Over the course of his prolific career as both teacher and scholar in Italian studies, his role as amateur archivist reinforced his position as one of Italian cinema’s most respected interpreters. As an archivist-scholar, Wagstaff brought precision to the study of both “classics” and non-canonical films, with a particular interest in exploring how production contexts (and their illuminating empirical data) could be gateways for sharpening Italian film hermeneutics. Evidenced by the titles in the archive, his tastes are indeed eclectic: arthouse staples, rare versions of neorealist classics and auteur films from the 1960s neighbor popular genre films (science fiction, action-adventure, peplums) and an extensive assortment of spaghetti westerns. Recent scholarship attests how such an expansive horizon of types was prescient for Italian screen studies in the twenty-first century. Today, as the reverence for traditional canons and their inevitable hierarchies are on the wane, collections that stretch beyond the precincts of the postwar Italian art film are increasingly vital.

Identifying Wagstaff as a hybrid scholar-archivist who interprets, but also gathers primary materials, highlights an emergent figure in the digital humanities of recent years.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://framescinemajournal.com/article/sparking-ideas-making-connections/#a8>

<sup>8</sup> For a list of recent projects being conducted around the world of cinema studies, see: <https://transformationsconference.net/dh-cinema-projects/>

The collector is and should be the starting-point for building any digital collection and is exemplary of what Schnapp and Presner recognize as the "scholar as curator and curator as scholar"<sup>9</sup>. They argue that this type of in-betweenness is fundamental to as slippery a field as DH, which still lacks and resists a clear-cut definition. Since Wagstaff himself oversaw much of the digitization of his films, he might represent a scholar-curator who is also engaged in the digital restoration.

This digital archivist is not unlike Walter Benjamin's collector. In his essay "Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting,"<sup>10</sup> Benjamin traced collecting to early human development, believing that children made for impulsive and, therefore, exemplary collectors.<sup>11</sup> Biographies underscore Benjamin's personal penchant for collecting, where over the course of his abbreviated life, he accumulated photographs, scraps of paper, books, and other cultural "detritus" along the way. Consistent with his belief that the gathering of certain objects was rooted in a childlike, pre-rational instinct, he often described collecting in affective terms, recounting how this idiosyncratic endeavor resulted from the "passion" of the individual in search of the "thrill of acquisition."<sup>12</sup> This emotional quality relates to his interest in exploring the individual history of the objects transmitted through touch: "For a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of

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<sup>9</sup> [http://humanitiesblast.com/manifesto/Manifesto\\_V2.pdf](http://humanitiesblast.com/manifesto/Manifesto_V2.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> In *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 2007), 59-67.

<sup>11</sup> In another essay, "Old Forgotten Childrens' Books," he noted: "Children are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being visibly worked on. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry" *Selected Writings Vol.1, 1913-1926* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996) 408.

<sup>12</sup> "Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories." *Illuminations*, 60.

his object.”<sup>13</sup> This physical and emotional link between collector and object led him to prefer private rather than public collections, where the archival impulse was powered by a profound intimacy between individual and object that was far more intense than any policy of responsibility espoused by an institution. Significant for Benjamin’s ideas on writing, history, and archiving, the magnetic charge produced by the physical encounter emboldened each collector to convey the object from the past, through the present, forward into the future.

There are two characteristics of Benjamin’s collector that are germane for Dr. Wagstaff and his archive at Notre Dame. The first is the sense of historical transmission that he felt while accumulating these film titles that others (including myself) experienced in visiting the original collection. When we began the project, DVDs and VHS were stacked from floor to ceiling, occupying an entire spare bedroom in Wagstaff’s home. There was a sort of haphazard meticulousness to their organization, with a chronology outlined in forms of media themselves (VHS were the oldest; DVDs somewhat newer; our hard drives the newest) and a peculiar system of annotation that Wagstaff devised. Since films were originally copied from television, we left intact any advertisements, news programs, and quirky, unannounced intermissions typical of Italian broadcasting. These signaled the year in which the titles were first copied, adding a layer of historicity - a supplementary “when” - that is distinctive from the film and that reveals the act of registration. (These abundant non-filmic elements, furthermore, make the study of all such copies of films also a study of Italian television; something certainly interesting to scholars of the latter medium). Thus, copies stressed the original conditions of their

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 60

recording, indicating the efforts of Wagstaff or friends and colleagues in Italy, working in the age before the internet rendered such exchange obsolete.

The painstaking recording and organization of these films over the course of decades points to the second distinguishing quality of Benjamin's collector that I will conclude with. That is, the immense personal affection for acquisition that characterizes the collector. While Benjamin is largely concerned with books, this is a plain example of cinephilia with regard to films. As David Bordwell has addressed, the cinephile and the critic have frequently been set against one other, with one thought to express appreciation while the other explores essences.<sup>14</sup> Wagstaff's imbrication of scholar and cinephile, not their separation, is essential to understanding the potential for new film scholarship that can grow from this archive. Throughout his scholarly career, Wagstaff matched a critic's theoretical rigor and historical clarity with a cinephile's interest in crossing art and entertainment. The range of cinematic types in his archive, therefore, reflects an organic, human engagement with film; not a staid, calculated catalogue dedicated only to preserving some universalized notion of "culture" (i.e. high culture). Expanding scholarly discourse from the deified to the despised reverberates with the pulse of living, breathing audiences, who crave variety, intellectual challenge and emotional escape at different moments in their experience as filmgoers. In an era when cultural arbiters of cinema are split either in fan-based categories (top-tens, subreddits, and best-of lists) or in institutions who promise the perpetuation of film-art (Criterion), the tastes of such a scholar-cinephile, one-and-the-other at the same time, has never been more welcome.

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.filmcomment.com/article/never-the-twain-shall-meet/>