

Preserving the Paper Trail: Jill Godmilow's *Far From Poland* Papers

As media archivists, it can be tempting to overlook the value of the paper that accompanies a moving image. However, print materials provide valuable insight into film collections and constitute an important part of preservation.

Understanding the context of a film or video - the stories recorded behind the camera or off-set - is arguably just as important as preserving the image itself.

Although the differing skills sets and methodologies employed in the fields print and media archival work can foster isolation, cross-pollination is essential to the efficacy of both disciplines. My goal in this project was precisely this: to enrich my training as a media archivist by gaining a stronger understanding of the basic processing of paper materials. To this end I prepared an item level inventory and sample finding aid for the paper collection pertaining to the film *Far From Poland* by Jill Godmilow prior to the collection's donation to the Wisconsin Center for Film and Television.

Creating the Item Level Inventory

After speaking with archivist Maxine Ducey at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Television Research, I determined that the best place to begin would be the creation of a detailed item-level inventory. While I understood that this was not necessarily standard procedure for processing paper collections, I assumed that because I had an extensive amount of time to work on the project it would be appropriate and useful for me to conduct a more granular analysis of the collection than it might receive in an archival setting. Additionally, I hoped that conducting such an inventory would allow me the opportunity to become extremely well acquainted with the contents and potential uses of the collection, which would, in turn, help me

generate a more robust finding aid and potentially lead to the creation of other supporting materials such as sample program notes or essays.

In structuring my inventory spreadsheet, my goal was to create an exhaustive list of all items included in the *Far From Poland* collection while capturing information that would assist in the creation of the finding aid. I began by recording the original folder name as it was written on the folder and assigning each folder a number - this proved to be invaluable when one day I arrived to find the folders in a different order. Then I recorded a name for each document. In some cases, such as correspondence, I created a name for the document; in other cases, I added information to the name given on the document to make it more descriptive. Next I provided an item description where relevant. In order to do this, I scanned through each document in an attempt to quickly ascertain its contents. While usually this step could be completed in a few seconds, often it took me several minutes to comprehend what each document was and how it fit into the larger collection. Based on this quick analysis I then recorded a date (if available) and assigned the item a category (for use in the creation of a finding aid). I supplemented this information with basic preservation information in the "Notes" column and then rated the priority of each document (1= high priority, 2=normal priority, 3=low priority). Finally I noted whether the document constituted original material.

In my original project proposal timeline, I allowed four hours for the creation of the item-level inventory. Once I began working, I began to realize that this figure was incorrect. All told, I spent between fifteen and twenty hours creating the

spreadsheet and an additional four hours editing its contents. During the editing process I found problems with each of my fields, mostly stemming from my lack of controlled vocabulary and inconsistent methods. I have described these issues below:

- **Document Name & Description:** Inconsistent naming conventions will make this information difficult for archivists to utilize. For instance, when I first began the inventory, I chose to describe letters by naming their senders and recipients (ex: "Letter from Jill Godmilow to Andreas Tanzler"). The date (which will be discussed later) is recorded in a separate field. As a result, there are many non-unique entries in this column (as many as there are letters from one person to Jill Godmilow and vice versa). In this case the description field becomes the only unique field. In the future I would include a date in the Document Name field for correspondence. As I proceeded I became aware of this problem and attempted to remedy it by including descriptive information in the Document Name field (i.e. "Letter from Jill Godmilow to Andreas Tanzler regarding footage licensing") and then providing a more detailed description in the Description field. This was problematic for two reasons – first, because it led to an inconsistency in the type and quality information contained in these fields; second, because creating a more detailed description required that I spend more time analyzing each document. Finally, as I began to run out of time, I began including groups of documents under a single heading (ex: "Correspondence

with Andreas Tanzler” or “Materials relating to Mannheim Festival”). These new categories were more efficient but less granular , and changing my procedure led to the creation of an inconsistent spreadsheet.

- **Year:** Here too the quality of my final product was jeopardized by time constraints and inconsistent practice. When I originally designed my spreadsheet, I chose to include a field for the year of creation of each document. In my mind, this was more of a preservation concern than one of intellectual control, and as such, recording the year was not my first priority when filling out the spreadsheet. In many cases, large stretches of documents would be from the same year, so I left the field blank, thinking I would go back later and correct it. In other cases the date was not immediately visible so I left the field blank. As a result, I was unable to accurately determine which documents were from which year when editing my spreadsheet. In the future I would mark the date “N/A” if a date is not visible and make an effort not to leave any fields blank when filling out the spreadsheet. Furthermore, it would have been much more useful if I had captured the entire date. Even though it can be very time consuming, this approach would have been assisted in the proper ordering of documents for the finding aid.

- **Category:** This category suffered from a lack of controlled vocabulary. While I maintained a keyword table of category labels as I worked, I found some

- documents difficult to categorize and often forgot that I had already created a similar category. However, these issues were easy to fix when editing the spreadsheet.
- **Notes:** This section was not entirely necessary. As I became pressed for time, I became less consistent about recording whether items were stapled or contained handwritten notes, etc. However, these problems will be encountered by whomever rehouses the material.

 - **Priority:** I developed the Priority field in order to mark items about which I needed to get further clarification from Jill; however, it also became clear that this could be a useful tool to pass on to the archivist processing the collection, as I could draw attention to items that contained particularly interesting information (1) or indicate which ones contained little unique information (3). However, my criteria for making these designations was very subjective and not always consistent. In general, documents were more valuable in context than taken individually, so this concept might did little to further the description of the collection as a whole.

 - **Original Material?:** Like the Priority section, I had intended this section to provide useful information to the archivist processing the collection. Ultimately, I do not think this is useful. Many non-unique items, such as a flyer for “What Means Solidarity?” are still important to the collection. There

were also a good deal of documents that probably are not unique, but I marked as such because I could not guarantee that the other copy still existed (ex: lab bills, and copies of business letters). Ultimately this field did not add to the value of the inventory.

- **Names, Organizations, and Other Works Cited:** I added these categories while I was editing the spreadsheet. Ultimately I think they are very useful and I wish I would have included them in my original design. In these fields, I pulled out names, organizations, and titles of other works cited in the spreadsheet so that I could better sort information. This was very useful in the development of the finding aid.

Creating the Finding Aid

Before creating a finding aid for this collection, I spoke with Maxine Ducey who emphasized that while the WCFTR aspires to maintain original order as much as possible, ultimate collections are organized by film, functional series, then by date. While I drew from coursework and work experience when creating the finding aid, ultimately I used the WCFTR's ArCat Catalog and Register as models. I then reorganized my original spreadsheet to create series. While I found that my original Category designations were inconsistent, I was able to use the find and replace function to whittle down the categories to a few primary functional series: Production Materials, Financial Records, Contracts, Distribution Materials, Festival Materials, and Press and Publicity. To these I added two more to account for items

not covered by my inventory: Realia (to include original sketches and props) and Additional Materials (to include the interview that I recorded with Jill as well as any additional materials she might have on her computer).

In creating these series, I tried to emulate Jill's original folder structure as much as possible so as not to veer too far from original order. This proved to be a complicated task. Although, for the most part her papers were very well-organized and easy to navigate, there were some situations in which materials from one functional series were mixed in with those of another functional series (for example, grant information was located in the festivals folder). These presented a significant obstacle to me as an archivist because the strong ordering principles of the rest of the collection lead me to believe that there is a good reason for documents to be stored where they are (in most cases). A more troubling problem was unlabeled documents. Within the *Far From Poland* papers there are a good deal of loose handwritten notes. These documents in and of themselves are difficult to classify, but they may provide insight to the documents that surround them. However, in those situations where materials are mixed, it is difficult to ascertain which documents these handwritten notes are meant to accompany. While I feel that the organization I have created here is efficient, functional, and easy for researchers to navigate, I hesitate to recommend its implementation because I am wary of how it might impact the meaning of the collection as a whole. In reorganizing a collection such as this one imposes a sort of narrative, and although the process of creating the item level inventory taught me a good deal about the stories behind the making of

Far From Poland, I fear that in dismantling their original order a good deal of valuable information might be lost.

Bibliography

Articles by Jill Godmilow

"How Real is the Reality in Documentary Film?". *History and Theory* 36 Vol. Wesleyan University, 1997.

"What's Wrong With the Liberal Documentary?", *Peace Review* - March, 1999.

"[Un]documenting History: An Interview with Filmmaker Jill Godmilow", Lynn C. Miller, *Text Performance Quarterly*, July 7, 1997, vol 7, number 3.

Selected Films by Jill Godmilow

Far from Poland. Anonymous Prod. Facets Video (Firm). Chicago, IL: Facets Video, 1984.

Nevelson in Process [Videorecording]. Anonymous Prod. WNET (Television station : New York, N.Y.). Chicago, Ill. : Home Vision distributor, 1977.

The Popovich Brothers of South Chicago [Videorecording]. Anonymous Prod. Balkan Arts Center. New York : Balkan Art Center ; New York : Ethnic Arts Center distributor, 1978.

Roy Cohn/Jack Smith [Videorecording]. Anonymous Prod. Strand Releasing (Firm). Santa Monica, CA : Strand Releasing ; New York? : Good Machine : Pomodori Foundation : The Laboratory for Icon & Idiom, 1994.

What Farocki Taught [Videorecording]. Anonymous Prod. Art Institute of Chicago. Video Data Bank. Chicago, Ill : Video Data Bank, The School, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1998.

Archival Practice References

Hensen, Ed. Steven L. *Describing Archives : A Content Standard*. Chicago: Chicago : Society of American Archivists, 2004.

Ellis, Judith. *Keeping Archives*. Ed. Australian Society of Archivists. Port Melbourne, Vic.: Port Melbourne, Vic. : Thorpe in association with the Australian Society of Archivists Inc, 1993.

Appendix 1: Sample ArCat Entry

Author / Creator: Godmilow, Jill

Title: Jill Godmilow Papers 1980-2000: *Far From Poland* (1984)

Quantity: Approximately 1.2 c.f. (3 archives boxes)

Summary: Papers of Jill Godmilow (b.1943), noted independent documentary and feature filmmaker, consisting of records relating to her 1984 documentary *Far From Poland*. Collection consists of production documents, contracts, distribution information, professional correspondence, funding information, and financial records relating to the film as well as to production companies Living Archives and Beach Street Films. Coverage of distribution correspondence and festival engagements is particularly strong and provides vital insight into the landscape of independent distribution networks in the 1980s. Correspondence relating production materials also offers valuable narrative of the complicated production history of the film.

Finding Aid: Register*

Internet Links: Register available on-line.*

Subjects:

Solidarity (Polish labor organization).
Far from Poland, c1987.
Living Archives.
Documentary films.
Experimental films.
Motion picture producers and directors.
Motion pictures --Distribution.
Women in the motion picture industry.
WCFTR-owned.

Form/Genre:

Manuscript Collection.
Financial records.

OCLC Number: xxxxxx

RLIN Number: xxxxxx

Permalink: xxxxxx

Location: Archives Main Stacks

Call Number: U.S. Mss ###xx

Shelf Location: Box 1

Description: Series I – Production Materials

Location: Archives Main Stacks

Call Number: U.S. Mss ###xx

Shelf Location: Box 1

Description: Series II – Financial Records

Location: Archives Main Stacks

Call Number: U.S. Mss ###xx

Shelf Location: Box 1

Description: Series III - Contracts

Location: Archives Main Stacks

Call Number: U.S. Mss ###xx

Shelf Location: Box 1

Description: Series IV – Distribution Materials

Location: Archives Main Stacks

Call Number: U.S. Mss ###xx

Shelf Location: Box 1

Description: Series V – Press and Publicity

Appendix 2: Sample Register Finding Aid

About the Finding Aid:

Title: Register of Jill Godmilow Papers 1980-2000: *Far From Poland* (1984)

Summary Information

Title: Jill Godmilow Papers: *Far From Poland* (1984)

Inclusive Dates: circa 1980 - 2000

Creator: Godmilow, Jill

Call Number: U.S. Mss ###XX

Quantity: 1.2 c.f. (3 archives boxes)

Repository:

Wisconsin Historical Society Archives / Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research

[Contact Information](#)

Physical Location:

See the catalog entry for information on possible additional materials and shelf locations.

Abstract: Papers of Jill Godmilow (b.1943), noted independent documentary and feature filmmaker, consisting of records relating to her 1984 documentary *Far From Poland*. Collection consists of production documents, contracts, distribution information, professional correspondence, funding information, and financial information relating to Living Archives and Beach Street Films production companies. Coverage of distribution correspondence and festival engagements is particularly strong and provides vital insight into the landscape of independent distribution networks in the 1980s. Correspondence relating production materials also offers valuable narrative of the complicated production history of the film.

Language: English

URL to cite for this finding aid: xxxxxx

Biography / History

Jill Godmilow is an independent documentary and feature film and video-maker currently based in New York City and South Bend, Indiana where she is a professor in the Department of Film,

Television, and Theatre at the University of Notre Dame. While she started making films as early as 1967, she is best known for her documentary *Antonia: A Portrait of the Woman* (1974), the first independent documentary to receive widespread distribution in the United States. The experimental, self-reflexive style that has become the critical hallmark of her work did not fully take shape until the early 1980s when she began working on *Far From Poland* (1984). When circumstances beyond her control prevented the filmmaker from going to Poland to make a documentary about the Polish Solidarity movement, she chose to make the film in her native New York, using archival footage, reenacted interviews, and dramatizations to construct an electrifying investigation of the complicated nature of documentary filmmaking. The film met critical success and controversy in both the United States and Europe but has never screened for a Polish audience. Godmilow went on to make a number of formally and socially investigative films including *Waiting for the Moon* (1987), *Roy Cohn / Jack Smith* (1995), and *What Farocki Taught* (1998).

Scope and Content Note

This Finding Aid was created as part of a student project for the NYU Moving Image Archiving and Preservation program and pertains only to papers relating to the film *Far From Poland*. The entire collection will ultimately include both print and audiovisual materials for all of Godmilow's films.

This collection of papers covers the pre-production, production, distribution, and critical reception of *Far From Poland*. The collection has been divided into the following series: Series I: Production Materials, Series II: Financial Records, Series III: Contracts, Series IV: Distribution Materials, Series V: Press and Publicity, Series VI: Realia, and Series VII: Additional Materials.

Series I: Production Materials includes original dialogue sheets, scripts, and music cue sheets for the film, as well as Copyright information and correspondence relating to production. Of particular interest in this series is correspondence with Jorge Fraga, a Cuban governmental official who was extremely critical of the concept for *Far From Poland*. The filmmakers' conversations with Fraga were later used as raw material for the dialogues with Fidel Castro featured in the film.

Series II: Financial Records includes all ledgers, checkbooks, bills and invoices relating to the production of the film, as well as grant information and contracts with Living Archives. These records provide a clear illustration of independent film financing opportunities of the era.

Series III: Contracts includes all actor, technician, and contributor agreements relating to the film.

Series IV: Distribution Materials includes all rental and sale agreements and royalties records, as well as festival programs and correspondence. The correspondence here renders a detailed snapshot of independent distribution networks at the time.

Series V: Press and Publicity includes all correspondence relating to press and advertising, as well as some clippings and publications. Both correspondence and articles illustrate the nature of the dialogue surrounding the film and provide valuable cultural context.

Series VI: Realia includes non-document paper items such as original set and costume sketches, small props, and title cards.

Series VII: Additional Materials includes items created more than ten years after release of film, including print-outs of email correspondence and a recorded interview from November 15, 2010 regarding reception and distribution of *Far From Poland*.

Administrative/Restrictive Information

Acquisition Information:

Presented by Jill Godmilow, New York City, New York, January, 2010. Accession Number: XXX##-###

Processing Information: Processing begun by Caitlin Hammer September 24, 2010.

Appendix 3: Publication List for *Far From Poland* (provided by Jill Godmilow)

INTERVIEWS WITH JILL GODMILOW (primarily pertaining to *Far From Poland*)

Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film To Our Idea of History, Robert Rosenstone, pgs 208-210, Harvard University Press, 1995

History and Theory, Theme Issue 36, "How Real Is The Real in Documentary Film? Jill Godmilow in Conversation with Ann-Louise-Shapiro", pgs.80-101, 1997

"An Interview With Jill Godmilow," Wendy Patterson, Afterimage, Vol13, No 7, 2/1986

American Film, "Jill Godmilow: Don't Tell Lies, Don't Tell The Truth, Tell Stories" June, pgs 20-24, June, 1989

They Must be Represented, Paula Rabinowitz, Chapter 8, pgs 176-204, "National Bodies: Gender, Sexuality, and Terror in Feminist Counter Documentaries", Verso 1994

Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary, Jonathan Kahana, Columbia University Press, 2008, pg 341-347

"Far From Finished: Deconstructing the Documentary", Reimaging America, Brook Jacobson, The Arts of Social Change, New Society Publishers.

PRESS ON FAR FROM POLAND

"Far From Poland," David Denby, New York Magazine

"Far From Poland: Drama +Documentary =The New Dramentary", Kathleen Hulser, The Independent, October 1983

"Poland Without Dogma, " Pat Aufderheide, In These Times, p 3-9, October 1984

"Far From Poland," David Denby, New York Magazine

"The Making of Far From Poland", Kathleen Hulser The Independent, 1984

Appendix 4: Item-Level Inventory (See Excel Document)

**Appendix 5: Additional Interview with Jill Godmilow November 15, 2010
(DVD)**