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Access to Collections

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Comparing Film Index Resources: Print and Online

Today “index” is a term largely associated with the retrieval efficiency of a database or search engine. While most users in the current generation have, at one time or another, used an index to navigate through a printed source, the trend toward a paperless world has rendered bibliographic indexing a lost art. But like glass blowing or blacksmithing, the printed indexes of yore still offer up a cottage-industry like service for the modern researcher. This essay pits some of the most comprehensive online film database against several out-of-print film indexes by comparing the results found on two randomly chosen topics: *The Hawaiians*, a 1970 film directed by Tom Gries, and the great silent film actress, Zasu Pitts.

I began with the online database that I thought - due to the reputation of the organization - would yield the most results: *The FIAF International Index to Film Periodicals*. In the spirit of non-circulating reference material, the FIAF index (and most of the others mentioned in this paper) is accessible only through library portals and the user must be equipped with a user id and password provided by the institution in order to access the site. Once in, the user is greeted with a thoughtful interface and search tools specifically geared towards the research needs of film scholars. It is possible, for instance, to omit film reviews from the results, or to choose from a list of actors ready-generated.

Despite these assets, the number of periodicals in the FIAF index that mention Zasu Pitts was disappointing to say the least: only four records and none specifically on the actress but of a film or genre in which she is associated. However, *Treasures of the Film Archives*, a silent film holdings database within the FIAF index, offers up archival information on the whereabouts and formats available of fifteen of her films; this kind of info is not so easily culled from any other single repository, printed or digital.

Interestingly, *The Hawaiians* - little seen and universally panned even in the year of its release - was found mentioned only in an obituary of actor John Phillip Law.

The British Film Institute's *Film Indexes International* page operates in a similar fashion to the FIAF index though casts a wider net by mining the databases of both BFI and the American Film Institute. The goal of *Film Indexes Online* is not to provide the user with supporting documentation or inter-text, but rather detailed filmographies of each and every film in either institution's catalogs. In this way, it functions more like a scholarly IMDB and offered little on my topics that was unique or surprising. What is useful for another type of research, perhaps, is the index's active utilization of tags, or keywords. While browsing through the entry for *Changing Husbands*, a 1924 film co-starring Pitts, I found I could click on the keyword "Divorce" and be met over 900 other titles involving the subject.

Due to the generic nature of its title, *The Hawaiians* needs the magic of qualifiers to yield relevant results in an online database. This was especially true of the *Film and Literature Index*, serviced by the gargantuan full-text aggregator, EBSCOhost. Because the host is not a film institution, the search engine is generic in structure yet allows for many variations on Boolean logic ("Hawaiians" AND "Heston" OR "Gries"). Intended for the more

general user, the results are often culled from popular, mass-read periodicals that survived into digitization. This was by far the best method for locating material on Zasu Pitts online, a quality seven hits: two articles on her life and work, several reviews on the restoration work done on her films, and a worthy citation of a 1932 interview printed in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Even *The Hawaiians* was acknowledged with a single result: a brief, neutral review from *Variety* magazine.

The search results from the *Film and Literature Index* was most conducive with what was found in the print resources, particularly *Motion picture performers: a bibliography of magazine and periodical articles, 1960-1969*. Alphabetical by performer's last name, the austere index lists articles found in the New York Public Library's periodical collection by author's last name. It bypasses reviews, fan magazines, and newspapers, focusing only content that is biographical, critical, and/or "career-orientated in nature" (Schuster vi). Several articles on Zasu Pitts that appeared on the EBSCOhost database appear here, but also listings of articles from *Photoplay*, *Colliers*, and obituaries; material woefully lacking from any of the online databases I perused. In an odd yet considerate gesture, the thick two-volume set from 1971 also includes an apologetic list of performers that are not included on the grounds that articles on them could not be found. (Schuster ix).

Indeed, apologia and gentle chastising characterizes the introductions and prefaces of each printed index. Indexers, after years compiling these resources by logging thousands of articles, feel compelled to introduce their tomes acknowledging limitations, explaining their provenance, and encouraging the reader not to trust them too much. "We feel that any such system of classification can be quickly grasped by an alert reader in search of specific subjects," writes the author of *The New Film Index: a Bibliography of*

Magazine Articles in English, 1930-1970 (MacCann and Perry xi). A daunting work organized by subject and author name, *The New Film Index* seems driven to assist a scholar not in research but in giving a topic shape. In other words, it attempted to be, in 1975, the internet: a platform in which to browse material by entering keywords, or in this case, navigating to the corresponding content page. While there is an endearing time-piece quality to the resource, *The New Film Index* feels painfully irrelevant next to a Firefox browser.

The *Retrospective Index to Film Periodical 1930-1971* published by R.R. Bowker, and the MOMA's *The Film Index: A Bibliography*, arrived in the 1970's with a mission to be something in-between a simple list of sources sorted by name or title, and a *New Film Index* style subject-driven catalogue. The *Retrospective* follows the FIAF model and divides the book into sections for subjects (which includes performers) and film titles. With this method, I easily found two reviews for *The Hawaiians*, the largest return on the film in all nine resources I perused. Elegantly organized, epicurean in selection, the *Retrospective* collects citations from just 14 periodicals housed in the University of Oregon with articles chosen based on the "author's judgment" (Batty vii).

The Film Index: A Bibliography also includes specially selected material but fleshes out the bibliographic data and provides descriptions, keywords and all relevant topics found in an article. Unlike *Retrospective*, *The Film Index* is a mix of high scholarship with mass media and includes works from film journals, published books as well as fan magazines and newspapers. Being a product of the MOMA, this particular index is the best designed index in terms of layout and typography, with graphical elements and atypical fonts that softened the rigors of skimming through dense text. Organized by subject, *The*

Film Index is sub-categorized by film title and cross-referenced in a title list at the end of the book. This solves the problems evident in Macann's *The New Film Index* for film scholarship is a title-dependent field and often a topic is born out of films the scholar has recently seen.

Film reviews are a polarizing resource. They are either desperately needed by a researcher for raw data and cultural context, or regarded as a nuisance, misdirecting the scholar to a less-than-critical material. Indexers of the film resource have addressed this problem by publishing reviews and periodicals in separate indexes. *A Guide to Critical Reviews, Part IV: The Screenplay* and *Film Review Index* are two examples of this kind of resource. The titles are similar to each other in design - simple lists of works sorted by film title - though the *Film Review Index* appears to have hopes of ending up in a scholar's home rather than a library shelf, existing to "supplant more expensive reference works," by which it may have been referring to *A Guide to Critical Reviews* (Hanson vii).

Drawbacks of *Critical Reviews* against the digital age are apparent when entering a film title into the EBSCOhost database. By only drawing from major publications, such as *The New York Times* - those with the money, history, and means to create for their archives a strong, digital presence - *Critical Reviews* as a strict and straightforward research tool is almost as irrelevant in the digital age as the bewildering *New Film Index*. Still, *Critical Reviews* does score some points for its democratic source selection. Almost all films for which there is a review available are listed; I was able to find the *Variety* review on *The Hawaiians* and many films starring Zasu Pitts. *Film Review Index*, however, selected their titles with the overriding consideration being "Would anyone at some point in time, ever

conceivably want citations to this film?" (Hanson viii). *The Hawaiians* apparently was considered unworthy of such citations.

There is character and personal touch that exudes from these printed works makes them an enjoyable reference alternative. For periodicals that have yet to make it into a public, digital repository, these indexes can lead a user to primary resources they would not find in a database. While the printed index still serves as a supplementary resource, it is painstaking and, at times, irrelevant against our expectations in the current age. Hopefully, these books will soon be scanned and their text rendered searchable by OCR software so we at least won't lose the index where we might forget the source.

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