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Access to Moving Image Archives

The collection I looked at was the laserdisc collection of a friend and former professor of mine, Roy Frumkes. Back before DVD became the format of choice for everyone, film buff and family alike, laserdisc was a format known for its great expense, limited capacity for content, but lauded for its vastly superior picture and sound quality compared to the then-format-of-choice VHS.

A laserdisc itself looks like a cross between a DVD and a vinyl LP. It's a 12" reflective silver disc that can hold a maximum of one hour per side. The disc is read by a laser embedded within the player, hence the name. The picture is analog, but still very impressive on some titles, especially ones mastered by the THX quality assurance program, such as the "Star Wars" films, "Terminator 2", "The Abyss", and "Strange Days". Audio-wise, the discs could hold a Dolby Surround analog track, and a PCM Stereo digital track. The digital audio used the same codec as CDs, which offered a sampling rate of 1411kbps (compared to a DVD stereo track, usually encoded at 192kbps).

In addition to being a great way to present films, the laserdisc format offered a capacity for extra features. A grand total of four tracks of audio are possible on laserdisc -analog left and right, digital left and right-, and a filmmaker's audio commentary could be programmed into one or two of these channels. Some discs used this extra audio space to include the film's musical score, or the film's music and sound effects tracks playing without dialogue.

There are two types of laserdiscs: CLV, Constant Linear Velocity, which can hold a maximum of one hour per side, and CAV, Constant Angular Velocity, which can hold only 30 minutes per side, but allows for frame-by-frame scanning. CAV was used in elaborate special edition packages. After the movie, you could get a plethora of photographs, production notes, storyboards, essays, and sketches as still frames you could scroll through. A special edition for the cult classic "Akira", based on a six-volume comic book, included the entire first issue of the comic, plus excerpts from the remaining five volumes in still form as part of its

supplements. Criterion, a boutique DVD and Blu-Ray label, got its start on laserdisc, and some of their more elaborate titles were referred to as 'film school in a box', due to the enormous amount of audio and video supplements some of their titles were given. A single film could cost a staggering \$125.

In addition, laserdisc was the first home video format to allow for up to 5.1 channels of sound, with a Dolby Digital signal embedded in the analog right track that could be read by a decoder. The resulting sound was lossy, running at only 384kbps, but still impressive for those with early 5.1 set-ups.

The format died off in the US in 2000, with the last disc pressed being "Bringing Out the Dead". The superior storage capacity (not to mention smaller media size), better picture quality, and lower price of DVD killed the format.

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Like a lot of serious film collectors, Roy had an impressive library of laserdiscs during their golden age (the early to late 90s). His collection is now down to a little over 180 titles, some of them duplicates. He donated a lot of them to the School of Visual Arts' film library, where they are still housed today. He's wanted to know the value of his collection since he's trying to free up a little space (and get some extra money) by getting rid of some of them.

The collection is quite eclectic, ranging from arthouse classics on the Criterion label like "The Red Shoes", to rare Hong Kong and Japanese discs of exploitation movies like "Doctor Butcher, M.D.". In addition, he owns a few titles on the rarely-used 7" format, a type used primarily for promotional discs and some music videos. Because the 7" format didn't use glue to seam together the plastic, is not susceptible to the dreaded 'laser rot' that most laser-read media suffers from when the glue begins to break down.

Some of these discs are quite rare, containing films that have never been made available on DVD, or versions of films only released on the laserdisc format. Some discs, especially Criterion titles, contain exclusive extras that can't be found anywhere else, and in some cases, extras that studios, filmmakers, and/or rights holders don't want to be

redistributed.

This collection has had a lot of educational value for Roy, who often uses the rare and now-unavailable supplemental material on certain discs as a teaching tool in his film classes. In addition, when he's writing about the history of some films, laserdiscs are useful in finding information that is otherwise unavailable. The first three James Bond films are a good example. They were quietly withdrawn on laserdisc because the audio commentaries contain some rather unflattering stories about the production of the films and author Ian Fleming.

One supplement I found on one of my discs that he's used in teaching are back and forth letters between Terry Gilliam and producers on "The Adventures of Baron Munchausen", which are printed in full, give a lot of insight on the production, and would probably be a legal headache to reproduce in any other format without getting the consent of all parties involved (I have a book on Gilliam, and although these letters are mentioned, they aren't reproduced in whole or part anywhere in the book).

My interest in laserdisc stems from it being a format popular with filmmakers and collectors, rather than the mass-market popularity of VHS. You had directors getting intimately involved with putting their titles onto laser, due to the much better presentation it offered. Young directors like Robert Rodriguez and John Singleton, seemed to use the laserdisc releases of their debut features as a kind of resume, including their early short films as well. Another reason I like the format is because in some cases, it can offer a better presentation than later DVD or even Blu-Ray versions.

The three titles I picked from Roy's collection are as follows: the super-rare and highly sought-after Japanese laserdisc of Disney's extremely controversial "Song of the South", a Hong Kong import of Zhang Yimou's "Shanghai Triad", and Criterion's special edition of "Sid and Nancy", which is a two-disc set.

The "Song of the South" disc is among the most valuable in Roy's collection. The film itself was made by Walt Disney in 1946 and is a live-action feature with about 25 minutes of animation, plus a few sequences that combine the two mediums. Although it was extremely

popular in its day, and saw a re-release in the US as late as 1986, it is an embarrassingly dated film that posits the dreaded 'happy slave' character type with the Uncle Remus character. In the US, the film has *never* seen the light of day on home video officially. In the UK and a couple of other European countries, the film has had a PAL-format VHS release. Due to its high picture and sound quality, this laserdisc is highly sought after by collectors and especially Disney animation fans. Although it has Japanese subtitles burned in during the dialogue, is the best home video presentation of the film anywhere in the world.

“Shanghai Triad” is a Hong Kong-pressed disc of what's considered to be one of Zhang Yimou's lesser efforts. The film was made a few years after “To Live”, an excellent, politically-charged portrayal of a family torn apart by the Cultural Revolution in China. “To Live” was a Chinese production, banned in its own country for depicting a non-idealized version of the Cultural Revolution. Yimou's follow-up was to be a 'non-controversial' gangster movie. The laserdisc release is a Hong Kong import. It presents the film in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1, contains both Mandarin and Cantonese language tracks, as well as burned-in English subtitles. This disc is probably the least valuable of the three, as good DVD releases of the film are widely available.

The final film is Alex Cox's biopic on Sid Vicious' relationship with Nancy Spungen, “Sid and Nancy”. This is one of the aforementioned Criterion discs; a 2-disc special edition with loads of extra material including a previously unreleased documentary about the Sex Pistols, audio and video interviews with the real Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen, concert photos, and filmmaker audio commentary. Although this film is widely available on DVD, the Criterion laserdisc (and its counterpart, a now out-of-print Criterion DVD) remain the only way to see the supplemental features in their full form due to music and image rights. This disc has some value on the collector's market.

Metadata Wishlist:

1. Title
2. Approximate value of item
3. Release date
4. Distributor/Publisher
5. Contents, ie CLV or CAV format
6. Country of origin
7. Running time of film
8. Packaging type (IE cardboard slip case, box set, gatefold)
9. Black and white or color
10. Soundtrack type (Analog, Digital, Dolby 5.1, DTS, etc)
11. Spoken Language
12. Brief rundown of supplements
13. Film version (if applicable)
14. Digital or analog video sourced
15. Subtitles
16. Close Captioning

Metadata Mapping for Three Titles

Song of the South, Japanese Laserdisc

<005 4988102019310>

<007 vd#cgaizm>

<033 \$a1946----\$a1990---->

<245 \$aSong of the South \$h[videorecording] / \$cdirected by Harve Foster, Wilfred Jackson. produced by Walt Disney. distributed by RKO.>

<300 \$a1 videodisc (laser optical) :\$bsd., col. ;\$c12 in.>

<440 \$aVisual media of Walt Disney feature film mixing live-action and animation>

<500 \$aTitle from cover.>

<500 \$aTwo CLV sides>

<500\$aAnalog video recording with digital and analog audio tracks>

<508 \$aScreenplay by Bill Peet, Ralph Wright, George Stallings, and Joel Chandler Harris. Starring James Baskett.>

<518 \$aFilm created in 1946; LaserDisc pressed 9/25/1990>

<520 \$aIncludes entire 94 minute feature in optional English and Japanese dialogue. Songs are subtitled in Japanese. Original theatrical aspect ratio of 1.33:1.>

<521 \$aAll ages.>

<651 \$aAmerican South\$xMusical \$aUncle Remus\$zGeorgia>

<650 \$aWalt Disney Home Video Japan.>

<710 \$aWalt Disney Home Video, Japan.>

Shanghai Triad, Hong Kong pressing

<005 4891827105780 >

<007 vd#cgaizm>

<033 \$a1995----\$a1996---->

<245 \$aShanghai Triad \$h[videorecording] / \$cdirected by Zhang Yimou. Written by Bi Feiyu. produced and distributed by Star Films.

<300 \$a1 videodisc (laser optical) :\$bsd., col. ;\$c12 in.>

<440 \$aVisual media of feature film>

<500 \$aEnglish title from cover.>

<500 \$aTwo CLV sides>

<500\$a Analog video recording with digital and analog audio tracks.>

<508 \$aDirected by Zhang Yimou>

<518 \$a**Film** created in 1995; LaserDisc pressed 4/22/1996>

<520 \$a**Includes** 103 minute feature in optional Mandarin and Cantonese dialogue, with English subtitles in the picture.

94 minute feature in optional English and Japanese dialogue. Songs are subtitled in Japanese. Original theatrical aspect ratio of 1.33:1.>

<521 \$a**Teens** and adults. >

<651 \$a**Hong Kong \$a Drama \$zPeriod Piece**>

<710 \$a**Star Media Hong Kong**>

Sid and Nancy: Criterion Collection

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For “Song of the South” and “Shanghai Triad”, I used the MARC21 schema. On “Sid and Nancy” I used DublinCore. MARC21 is actually of good use to cataloging laserdiscs, as searching for a specific title could yield the desired results. The extra amounts of detail, including the option to list the languages the film is available in and some of the supplements, make for a greater feeling of access to the title. However, there is no option for condition or packaging type, just the general size of a laserdisc itself. Laserdiscs generally come in three types of packaging: a normal cardboard slipcase (much like an LP); a gatefold, the same principle, except it folds out and can hold two or more discs; and box sets, which includes the discs packaged (usually) in paper packaging within a thick cardboard casing. The other problem is that it lists everything under the one heading of 'videorecording' and doesn't get any more specific unless you go to the title proper.

Even with the problems MARC has, DublinCore is much more limited in cataloging laserdiscs, Listing out supplements and language are out of the question, and only very basic information can be used. If you were to ask for something using the DublinCore system, you'd risk getting the wrong version (for instance, there's two pressings of "Shanghai Triad", American and Hong Kong; so if you wanted the American pressing and didn't know the difference because of the more limited amount of data you'd be out of luck).

Although laserdisc is a long-dead format, there are still titles in circulation, and titles in demand among educators and collector's alike due to their unique properties. For this reason, I chose to write about the format, and come up with how to apply it to metadata.