

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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Let me begin with a story.

A long time ago, in a city far far away, there lived a clockmaker named Mr Smith. He was a small, kindly old gnome and he had a wonderful shop, full of all kinds of clocks. It was called “The House of Time”, and it was a magical place, a landmark in the city. Every hour, on the hour, all the clocks in the shop would chime together. It was like an Aladdin’s cave, full of hidden treasures.

Mr Smith was a shy man.. He lived alone in rooms behind his shop, surrounded by his treasures and his memories. He had an air of mystery about him, and people wondered - as people do - what secret things might be hidden in those back rooms. More clocks? Certainly. A workshop and tools? Of course, since Mr Smith made and repaired clocks for a living. But - maybe he made and repaired other machines too. Maybe there was even a **time machine** in the “House of Time”!

One day Mr Smith had a visitor. Apart from his customers, he did not often have visitors. But this one was a young man also in search of hidden treasure. They talked a while, and seemed to strike a chord. Mr Smith invited him for tea. In those mysterious back rooms!

It was a simple meal, and when it was over, Mr Smith looked sad. “I am getting old”, he said, “and I have a bad heart. I have no family. I have collected many precious things, and I’m worried about what will happen to them. They need to be safe in a place where they will be treasured”. So saying, he led the young man to a wall covered in shelves, on which lay stacks of gleaming cans. “These”, he said, “are the original negatives of all the films made by Efftee Studios. It closed in 1934. They might have been destroyed had there been no-one to care. Will you now care for them?”

It was a long and magical evening, much of it spent with Mr Smith’s time machine: a 35mm projector on which he ran some treasured nitrate prints, while they drank tea and nibbled cracker biscuits and salami until the small hours.

That’s not the end of the story, for the young man was a film archivist, and Mr Smith’s collection came to live happily ever after in a film archive in Canberra.

That’s a true story - every word of it. Well, okay, not every word. Okay, then, I lied - about the salami. It was really cheese. But the rest of it’s true, and the young man was me. The year was 1971, the City was Melbourne. Within a year, Mr Smith lost the lease on his shop. The “House of Time” was no more, and he died soon after.

You may or may not have had the thrill and privilege of making a significant find - but if not, and you persist in the field, you will. You become the link to its survival. Someone invites you into their life and their labours and trusts you to pick up where they leave off.

This is the personal aspect of our field. It has many other aspects: local, national and global. Collectively we care for an unimaginable quantity of images and sounds. Yet there are only a few thousand of us worldwide: an elite force holding in our hands the visual memory of the world.

The pioneers of our field - those who founded and developed today's major film archives, who discovered the skills and methods of archiving, who established FIAF, and who championed the then unwelcome cause of film preservation - have mostly moved on. We of the second generation - people like Paolo and me - learned our craft from them: on the job.

The third generation - that's you - inherits a more complex scene. Skills and methods are well developed. Technical and organisational structures are sophisticated. Attitudes are changing - now our work is accepted as vital and necessary. Challenges multiply: to nitrate film decomposition we now add acetate vinegar syndrome, and the implications of digitisation and the internet.

Your generation will be the first to be formally trained, rather than "learning on the job". As professionals, you need not only to know and practice many skills - but also to know **why** you are practising them, and their underlying theory and ethics. It's not just a question of due formal recognition: the future of our field depends on it.

As graduates you are an elite group: not only because you are few, but also because you are the vanguard of change. Let me make a prediction: 5 years from now, a qualification from the Jeffrey Selznick school, or an equivalent program, will be a base requirement for people seeking a professional post in film archiving in North America. How do I know? When **you're** the ones hiring staff, what will **you** look for in your recruits?

You have completed a unique, hands-on course that is highly regarded internationally. You earned your place in it. You've had the faith in yourself and your chosen field to make a substantial investment in your future. Besides a diploma, you have gained an influential network of connections - some of which you'll keep up for the rest of your careers. You have also gained that great intangible - credibility. To a potential employer you are a known quantity.

Keep in touch with your alma mater. Like you, it will grow and evolve. Some of you may know that my own institution, the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, in partnership with the University of NSW, also conducts, by internet, a permanent distance learning course in audiovisual archiving. It complements the course you have just completed. So, logically, we're exploring how we can formally link both of them, to everyone's benefit, and continue growing.

Let me conclude, as I began, at the personal level. During World War II, Henri Langlois - the legendary founder of the Cinematheque Francaise - split up his film collection and hid it, can by

can, in nooks and crannies all over Paris to prevent it falling into the hands of the Nazis. Closer to the present, when the powers behind the iron curtain chose to rewrite history, I know of archivists who hid radio and television recordings that officially no longer existed. They risked dismissal, imprisonment or worse. You or I may never face such situations, but such courage and resourcefulness is our professional heritage. In the end, we are the conscience of our field and our society. It is we who keep the “House of Time”.

It is you, the third generation, who will reshape our field and its structures, look at the global issues beyond the day-to-day pressures, question the conventions, make the discoveries and meet the challenges of the new century. Remember in whose house you have spent the last year! The Maori people of New Zealand have a name for their national film archive which translates as “the guardians of the treasures of light”. To be a guardian is a privilege. It requires diligence, courage, skill and a spirit of adventure. You’ve shown you have these. Now the adventure begins. Seize the day!

My congratulations and good wishes to all of you.