

Animal, vegetable or mineral? Cataloguing and indexing in the Natural History Unit Film Library

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Describes the function and use of the Film Library of the BBC Natural History Unit, its cataloguing procedure, indexing methods, identification of picture content, and future projects, including computerization.

The Natural History Unit (NHU) of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is based in Bristol, and was founded in 1957. It produces both television and radio programmes covering wildlife subjects, in a variety of styles, ranging from straight documentaries, studio shows, outside broadcasts to drama documentaries and occasional 'blockbuster' series taking several years to produce. Our best known example of the latter *genre* is 'Life on Earth'.

Within the NHU the library services are closely associated with the production of programmes. There are two separate libraries, one for sound effects and recordings, one for film and information. There is a written account of the Unit's Sound Library, and catalogues of its holdings are available in the British Library of Wildlife Sounds, British Institute of Recorded Sound, to *bona fide* enquirers.

The function of the Film Library

In the Film Library we are concerned with the dissemination of information gleaned from published and unpublished sources, as well as documentation of the subject matter of, and technical and legal information about, films. We subscribe to about 50 magazines and journals to form a current-awareness service, but do not deal with books (except those used for our own cataloguing purposes).

The Film Library has three primary functions. Firstly, to store, index and retrieve the Unit's programmes so that excerpts or complete programmes are available for retransmission. We also provide film clips for inclusion in many other BBC programmes. Secondly, we locate and audition new natural history films for possible pur-

chase and later transmission, keeping tabs on the wildlife film industry worldwide. We function thirdly as a source of information on all natural history matters for the entire BBC. To this end we are creating a vast file of contacts, a 'Who's Who' of naturalists and relevant institutions around the world. We also keep a large and growing store of photocopies and reprints, filed under broad subject groupings.

Subject coverage

I chose the title 'Animal, Vegetable or Mineral' for this paper, as those words go some way to describe the subject coverage of the NHU Library. We are interested in the natural world, from popular natural history to academic aspects of zoology, botany and geology, also in peripheral areas, such as man and his relationship to the environment, his portrayal of the natural world in art, literature and poetry.

We cover a wide range of subjects, and try to do so on a worldwide basis. About 60% of the information stored in our catalogues refers to films or television programmes listed from foreign sources. We know of over 20,000 films with a substantial wildlife content from something like forty different countries, over all five continents. The Unit is interested only in transmitting films that show animals behaving in a *natural* way. There are strong ethical considerations in wildlife film-making. Films depicting animals that have been unduly disturbed during filming, or trained animals purporting to be wild, are excluded from the Unit's transmitted output. Such films are, however, noted in our indexes, and we even have entries for the fictional cinema films 'Jaws' and 'Orca'.

Users and requests

The NHU has no monopoly within the BBC for making wildlife programmes. For example, 'Horizon', a fifty-minute science documentary series, made by Science and Features Department in London, occasionally features biological topics. Continuing Education Department produce a whole range of natural history programmes, and many Schools and Open University programmes cover biological subjects. Producers in

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these departments are some of our greatest users. They can make some pretty obscure requests for footage, like microphotographic shots of bacteria reacting to the Earth's magnetic fields, which was asked for recently by an 'Horizon' producer.

The non-natural history specialist can be relied upon to keep us on our toes. Some of our most amusing and testing enquiries emanate from unexpected quarters. For instance, we have provided film of spiders, and of volcanoes erupting, for 'Dr. Who'. We have supplied 'Tenko', the drama series about life in a Japanese Prisoner of War Camp for women, with film of jungles for an escape episode; the rest of the drama was filmed in Dorset. Most of these requests present no particular problems, but some are much more difficult to fulfil. We had a request from the Children's Department for six different animals to illustrate each of the seven colours of the rainbow. Not an easy task: we had difficulty thinking of six different red and blue animals, let alone six different indigo or violet ones! The difficulty in dealing with this sort of request is anticipating the user's needs when indexing. We have no heading for colour; our nearest headings are for camouflage and warning colouration, which are both biological concepts. They did not help very much with this particular request. Again, the producer of 'The Young Musician of the Year' wanted several different animals behaving in a humorous fashion, to make up a short sequence that the competitors could use as the basis for an 'on the spot' composition. We did not then have a heading for humorous shots, and therefore had to think of animals behaving in a naturally amusing way. As a direct result of this request we do now have a heading for humorous shots, which is used from time to time with good effect, especially for satirical programmes.

We usually try to fulfil a request by sending film off to the enquirer within 24 hours. Sometimes, however, we are asked to respond almost instantaneously. Being asked by News Department at 12 noon for footage of baby seals being clubbed to death on the Canadian ice, for transmission later that evening, is not unusual: indeed, it is quite predictable; the seal cull is an annual event. Obviously the majority of requests from News Department are not predictable. We can 'transmit' urgently required film clips from Bristol to be recorded onto videotape at the London end. This is the method used to supply regional news programmes.

One of the most demanding series utilizing the Film Library's services is the live weekly 'Nature' programme. This is produced from Bristol, and on studio days the Unit positively hums with activity. Most of the film clips are required a week before the show, which enables us to get the best possible quality transmission material ready. News stories tend to break a matter of hours before transmission, and then an additional piece of information is required, or film clip needed, without delay.

Work for the 'Nature' series of autumn 1982 built up throughout the summer. Part of our brief was to find clips of film never seen on British television before. As about 60% of the information in the film catalogues refers to non-BBC films, this request from 'Nature' was well within the system's capabilities. We were able to recommend that they bought a sequence of giant pandas in the wild filmed by an American crew and previously shown on the American network, ABC.

'Nature' came off the air in March, and at a general 'post mortem' enquiry for improvements for the next series, we agreed to take daily newspapers to build up a file of news items. A surprising amount is cut from three national dailies (*The Times*, *Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*) and three Sunday heavies, *The Sunday Times*, *The Observer* and *The Sunday Telegraph*. The files are already providing items of interest not only to the 'Nature' production team, but also to others, including 'Wildtrack'—a children's nature magazine—and of course the radio production team.

We are able to supply film clips to *bona fide* outside enquirers on a commercial basis, through BBC Enterprises, a commercial limited company with a directive to sell complete programmes, or sequences, records, or other merchandisable spin-off from programmes originally made for British radio or television transmission. Film Library Sales, a section of BBC Enterprises, notify us of their customer's *desiderata*. The commercial exploitation of our library is of growing importance. Another department of BBC Enterprises has marketed a videocassette and videodisc—'David Attenborough's Videobook of British Garden Birds'. This was an experimental compilation using the library's stock of negatives and programmes. The disc was not intended to be broadcast and has optional teletext facility as well as a double soundtrack to give the viewer a choice of listening to commentary or bird song or both. More such projects are planned.

The cataloguing procedure

Accessioning. Each time we receive a film, from whatever source of supply, we make out two file-cards. One card, the master, is filed by the title of the film, following the normal filing conventions. The second card, called the film card, records basic details about the film; the title, a brief synopsis, the producer and the length of the film. These are filed by an accession number. Each film is given an accession number, which is a bit of a misnomer, since the film may only be on loan to us for a relatively short period of time. However, the accession number is referred to in our indexes.

For Natural History Unit programmes the film card and accession number are used to identify film or videocassette material housed in the vaults.

During a year we see a vast number of films from a variety of sources. Some arrive unsolicited; but the

majority arrive because library or production staff have specifically asked to see them. Keeping tabs on the wildlife film-making world involves scanning several current awareness and trade magazines and film distributors' catalogues, and attending film festivals.

Shot lists. After the two cards have been prepared, the next part of the cataloguing process is viewing and shot-listing the film. Shot-lists are written descriptions of the visual content of a film; visual, because at this stage we are not usually concerned with listing information about the commentary, music or sound effects. For BBC films this information is supplied by the production office in post-production scripts; for films from other sources we may make some general observations on the quality or appropriateness of the commentary or music.

Each individual shot or sequence in a film is listed in the order in which it appears, known as the running order. We abbreviate the photographic descriptions, but these are fairly standard throughout the film industry; for instance, CU for close up, WA for wide angle, MS for mid-shot, and so on. The running time of the film is noted, with the major credits like cameramen, producer, film editor and film distributor. These appear at the end of the shot-list; at the front is a brief synopsis. Each shot-list is identified by the same accession number given to the film on its arrival.

The purpose of shot-listing is to identify sequences for inclusion in other productions. The potential re-use value of film clips depends on three major factors: the length of a shot or sequence (a couple of seconds is not much use to most people); the accessibility of the film for copying purposes; and—perhaps the most important factor governing reuse of film clips—ownership of the copyright.

Copyright exists in films for 50 years from the date of production, but the film can be sold to various countries under licence, for varying periods of time and for various purposes. Given enough time and money, most sequences can be cleared for reuse. Information on copyright clearances is something we give to our enquirers as a matter of course when providing them with information about suitable footage, but we do not actually negotiate business terms with the copyright owner. Where reference to a film has been gleaned from catalogues or other such sources, we may still be able to give some advice, based on experience, on the likelihood of obtaining clearance. Some production companies are naturally reluctant to sell sequences for fear that, by doing so, they may prejudice the chances of selling the complete film.

Indexing

After the shot-lists have been typed we decide which entries are required for the 'Kalamazoo' strip index. Each strip entry is a paraphrase of that particular part of

the shot-list, together with the accession number and a simple code of stars which give an immediate clue as to the film's source.

When we designate the index entries the three criteria I mentioned earlier—shot length, accessibility and copyright—are applied to each film, together with rarity value and aesthetic merits. The depth of indexing differs from film to film, depending whether it is a BBC film or from outside. For our own Natural History Unit films it is normal for each species appearing in the film to be given an index entry. For outside-source films we are more interested in indexing material with a high rarity value, and the aesthetic appeal of the film plays a more important role. Thus, for example, film of snow leopards, extremely rare animals seldom captured on film, will be indexed from whatever source and whatever the length of sequence. However, footage of Andean condors would have to be of exceptionally high photographic quality to surpass the film that is already indexed from 'Flight of the Condor'.

There may appear to be only a finite amount of material to be incorporated into our index on any given subject; but not so. There will always be new techniques of filming natural history, and there is much still to be learnt and observed about even the commonest species. An example of the use of new technology was in a series of 'Foxwatch' programmes, where remote-controlled cameras using infra-red light were able to capture the night life of the town fox. New subjects and new techniques must always be reflected in our indexes.

Cross-references. Most requests are for footage of individual animals and, as this is the main point of entry for most users, it is here that the main indexing emphasis lies. But there are two other entry points into the index: a straightforward geographical approach, and a second, far more complex and covering a wide range of concepts, our system of 'cross-references'. These concepts may be biological; for instance, courtship, photosynthesis or feral species; they may be environmental; for example, salt marshes, or fenland; or they may be much less formal, like those humorous shots.

We also include here headings for some of the various photographic techniques used; for example, time-lapse, infra-red and slow motion. We have a small thesaurus to control the vocabulary used for the headings.

We are aware that this cross-referencing is a rather weak aspect of our indexing practice. But whilst it remains a cumbersome manual system, laborious to maintain, we are making no real attempt to increase the number of headings. The computerization project will enable us to cater much more readily for 'cross-references'; the process will become automatic, following rules and guidelines which we are building into the system.

The documentation of our programmes does not end with the shotlists, cards and Kalamazoo strip index. We also keep all the post-production scripts of the programmes, and copies of the contracts or other associated legal agreements. Post-production scripts are prepared by the production office towards the end of the production process, as a permanent record of the visual, spoken and musical content of the film. They also list the sources of film used—information which is invaluable in tracing copyright ownership.

Identification of picture content

The single most difficult thing about cataloguing and indexing moving pictures is the identification of what is being viewed. Many animals cannot be reliably identified just by looking at celluloid images of them. Features of anatomy hidden from the camera are required for accurate species determination. Many flies, for instance, are differentiated by the pattern of veining on their wings, and many small rodents by their dentition, neither of which is readily apparent on screen. Camouflage presents its own problems; sometimes one must simply wait for something to move before one can even begin to identify it! Technical considerations like camera-angle can also cause some difficulties.

Fortunately, though, most of the animals will have been filmed for a particular reason and we will therefore have a good idea as to the identity of the subject. During the shooting of a programme each cameraman fills out a sheet for every roll of film that he uses. These log sheets, with any additional notes made by the producer (he may have had a local wildlife expert on hand at the time the film was shot) are of great value to us.

The identification of animals filmed for a particular purpose may prove difficult; when filmed for a 'visual effect' it is well-nigh impossible. Filming for 'visual effects' is influenced more by the lighting conditions, to give mood and atmosphere to the pictures, than by scientific considerations. Ideally we would wish that everything shot-listed were accurately identified, but this is just not feasible.

Future projects

The computerization of the Natural History Unit Film Library is part of a co-operative scheme, involving the main BBC Film and Videotape Library in London, and several of the BBC's regionally sited film libraries. The scheme is called RELCLASS, standing for Regional Classification System. It is designed entirely as an on-line facility, but is only a reality for one location yet, Leeds. Others are gradually joining the data network. Retrieval from the common pool of filmic data will be by a specially developed classification scheme, whose acronym TELCLASS stands for Television Classification Scheme. The classification is faceted with a decimal notation. It is capable of covering the whole of human

knowledge, and is specifically designed to meet the requirements of television programme material. Work began on the zoology part of the schedules 9 months ago.

Taxonomy, the science of the classification of living plants and animals, is dynamic and constantly changing; to some extent it is a matter of opinion between botanists and zoologists. This has caused the several authoritative texts available for consultation to be difficult to work with. They disagree with each other at nearly all levels in the zoological and botanical hierarchies. In designing the TELCLASS schedules we have deliberately steered an independent course. Our aim is to build a system reflecting filmic warrant rather than an academic zoological classification. We have been conscious too of the indexing needs of non-natural history specialists, and have made allowance in extensive footnotes and rules to enable more commonplace items to be classified.

Inevitably, we have created some very long class numbers to delineate species and even, where necessary, subspecies or races. We trust, however, that daily use of the system will breed familiarity.

The first point of entry for retrieval purposes will be the A to Z subject listing. In considering this we have deliberately been comprehensive in detailing, for example, the number of synonyms and different usage of names.

There has been much routine checking of Latin names for the species headings from the manual system, and where these were lacking they have been included. We have created something like 2500 class numbers, but have covered only the mammals, birds and fishes. There is much work still to be done.

Our other future plans are tied in with the growing commercial exploitation of the library's resources. We aim to produce more videobooks and to sell more film clips, but the service we offer to programme makers within the BBC must never falter; they are our prime consideration.

What boots an index?

'In 1936 the final volume appeared . . . just twenty-two years late. But there was one further murmur, when the idea was mooted of publishing a single-volume index to the entire work. The Syndics of the Press turned it down—it was the last time that the *Cambridge Medieval History* was to engage their attention—and passed on to their next business, discussion of the book trade's Spitfire Fund.'

—from P. A. Linehan, *The making of the Cambridge Medieval History*, in *Speculum*, 57, 1982, 493–4; quoted by permission of the Medieval Academy of America.