After months of development the BUFVC is re-presenting the work of the InterUniversity History Film Consortium as an academic digital resource. Linda Kaye, BUFVC Research Executive, describes the practical and intellectual challenges in bringing these pioneering productions to a different screen.

The InterUniversity History Film Consortium (IUHFC) was instrumental in the development of the ‘film and history’ movement in Britain in the early 1970s. Along with the University Historians’ Film Committee established by Paul Smith, the IUHFC, in questioning the role of film as a medium of historical communication, sought to challenge some of the basic concepts relating to modern historical research that prevailed at the time, the most fundamental being the view that only written records constituted a ‘legitimate’ source of evidence. As a result, it not only catalysed and broadened the debate around the nature of film as a historical resource but sought to legitimise the use of film in teaching.

The IUHFC was formed in 1968 by the historians John Grenville and Nicholas Pronay (University of Leeds), essentially to produce films for educational use in Britain. History departments, initially from the universities of Leeds, Reading, Nottingham and Wales, all paid £120 and were credited with the production of one film. Between 1968 and 1999 its members produced sixteen films, primarily compiled from newsreel footage, examining key events, topics and personalities of the twentieth century. The booklets, which accompanied each of these films, were written by the historians responsible for the production and now represent key texts. These include John Ramsden’s study of Stanley Baldwin (1979), Tony Aldgate’s dissection of the Spanish Civil War (1973) and Anthony Polonsky’s portrait of fascism (1980) produced with James Joll and Stuart Hood. Taken together, these productions provide us with a fascinating insight into how our understanding of film as a historical source has changed and developed over the space of three decades. And yet IUHFC is conspicuous by its absence in accounts of the film education movement and current discourse on film and history, which seem to rue a lack of methodology so strongly advocated by members of the Consortium. It was this sense that history was not serving the IUHFC well that informed the idea to digitise its entire output for access by UK universities and colleges for educational and/or research use.

The histories of the BUFVC and IUHFC have been closely linked since the formation of the Consortium in 1968. The seminal conference, Film and the Historian, held at University College, London in April 1968 was organised under the auspices of the British
Universities Film Council (BUFC), as it was known then. These close links persisted throughout the 1970s and were cemented in 1981 when BUFC undertook to distribute IUHFC films. It seemed a logical step and fitting legacy, as the IUHFC was gradually winding down, to extend accessibility to both the films and booklets through digitisation of the content and its provision, within a dedicated micro-site, from the BUFVC website, now accessible at: http://bufvc.ac.uk/filmandthehistorian. In line with News on Screen, we wanted to provide context as well as content within a resource tailored to an academic audience. What this meant and how it was realised provided us with both conceptual and technical challenges as the legacy of the IUHFC took us back to looking at films as evidence, but this time with an added digital dimension. This led us to identify four key factors that we were keen to address: transparency, context, citation and design.

Transparency
We felt it was important to make the process of selection and digitisation for both the films and documents as transparent as possible. So Frazer Ash, the BUFVC’s Media Technician, who was responsible for both these stages, wrote two short articles, published within the project section of the website. The first describes what was actually involved in choosing the material that would be digitised. As the sole distributor of these films since 1981, the BUFVC held multiple copies of these films on a variety of formats including 16mm prints, Hi and Lo-band U-Matic, Beta SP and Super VHS tapes. Although the aim is always to select elements as close to the original as possible, this was complicated by a number of factors. Funds were not available to make prints from the small number of negatives left in our possession, so we had to rely on rental film copies which had suffered a great deal of wear and tear. The archival nature of the material itself meant that damage and deterioration had been replicated so it took time to determine when the problem had originated, especially if you were working from a Hi-Band U-Matic of the 16mm print. Picture quality also had to be balanced against sound quality. As Frazer notes, For instance, a 16mm copy of one film might have superior image quality but poor sound, while a Hi-Band U-Matic of the same film could possess good clean sound but show evidence of deterioration. What is most important, in the context of the film, to the viewer? Which takes precedence in any given circumstance – image or sound? Is it, for instance, the spectacle of the Nuremberg Rally that’s of interest or the speech itself?

Ultimately it is personal choice within a given set of criteria, the process of which is documented but we wanted to highlight for the user how many different possibilities exist before we even get to the stage of digitisation.

At this point a transformation occurs as we move from the analogue to the digital. Here Frazer looked again at the choices we had, the processes we used and why we made the decisions we did. Why we chose Flash as our media format and the details of the bit rate may seem the preserve of the specialist but this is another literacy we should be acquiring if we are to ask the right questions about what we are looking at. For example, as Frazer notes, after the digital files were created ‘Steps were then taken to eradicate video noise from the image borders by cropping frames where necessary. This ‘noise’ was a result of transcoding from tape, a by-product of the analogue to digital process’. In addition the Technical Info drop down on the web page for each individual film states what was done to it, something that should accompany every piece of digitised moving image content. By emphasising the changes that occur within the process of digitisation we also hoped to highlight that the line between replication and creation can be a very thin one. This form of interrogation is vital if we are to gain a critical understanding of digitised material in terms of evidence.

Context
Context is an essential element in any academic resource and we identified two important areas that would encourage users to delve more deeply and ask more questions. The first was to give some sense of the history of the IUHFC and the second, the place it occupied within the historiography of film and history. We asked the historians Dr Peter Bell, Executive Secretary of IUHFC, and James Chapman, Professor of Film at the University of Leicester, to write these for us not only to provide different perspectives but also to add different voices to the site. Some research into the early history of the IUHFC led us to the British Universities Film Council journal University Vision (1968-75), a biannual publication designed to act as a forum for considering the role and application of film and television within teaching and research. Edited by the historian Paul Smith, its first edition in 1968 provided a springboard for the nascent film and history movement. Over the following seven years it continued as a platform for the dissemination of ideas and
Much of this was achieved through a continuation of the ‘box’ format already employed by the BUFVC website. We added, however, such things as the thumbnail grids found on the text and film landing pages. Initially, links to text and films were presented as part of an overall list. In the case of films, this was in the form of thumbnails to the left, synopsis and production information to the right. It was felt, however, that this had a somewhat cluttered appearance, and also suggested the presence of a hierarchy, an unwanted side effect. Perhaps the most demanding of page designs was the player for the films. We knew from the outset we wanted to provide not only information about the film itself, but also about the digitisation process. The question here was how to display a significant amount of information while allowing the film to remain the focus. A ‘full screen’ option would naturally eliminate any distractions, but when increased in size makes artifacts more prominent, so how to compromise? Our first decision was that the page on which films were displayed should be as dark as possible, allowing the film to draw the eye. We then set about considering ways of displaying the text. The forerunner of our consideration was the use of drop-downs. These would allow us to potentially include many pages worth of information without overwhelming the user. Core information such as directors, producers and production companies could remain on display at all times, but credits, for editor and sound for example, could be hidden unless required by the user.

Again, by sharing the concerns and dilemmas we encountered at this stage in the project, we not only hope to raise awareness of how important design is in how we encounter, or fail to encounter, digitised material but also to widen discussion relating to digital academic resources. What information should be included with content? How should it be provided?

In re-presenting the IUHFC material to a new generation within an online environment we have been struck by how relevant the concerns articulated by these historians forty years ago are today. Although the films themselves are now historical texts it seems appropriate in an era where the compilation of archive film is no longer the preserve of filmmakers that we should be re-assessing the role and use of moving image both as an historical source and medium of communication through them.

Linda Kaye
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http://bufvc.ac.uk/filmandthehistorian

THE FILMS OF THE IUHFC

British Universities Historical Studies in Film (1969-1995)
1. THE MUNICH CRISIS (John Grenville and Nicholas Pronay, 1969)
2. THE END OF ILLUSIONS: FROM MUNICH TO DUNKIRK (John Grenville and Nicholas Pronay, 1970)
3. THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR (Tony Aldgate, Paul Addison and Owen Dudley Edwards, 1973)
4. THE WINTER WAR IN ITS EUROPEAN CONTEXT (Derek Spring and George Bradt, 1974)
5. THE GREAT DEPRESSION (Peter Stead, 1975)
7. A CALL TO ARMS (Philip M. Taylor, 1985)
8. IMAGES OF THE SOVIET UNION AT WAR 1941-1945 (Philip Bell and Ralph White, 1989)
9. THE COLLECTIVISATION OF SOVIET AGRICULTURE 1927-1935 (Derek Spring and Maria Zezina, 1995)

Archive Series (1974-1999)
1. NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN (Alan Beattie, David Dilks and Nicholas Pronay, 1974)
2. THE ORIGINS OF THE COLD WAR (Peter G. Boyle, 1975)
3. STANLEY BALDWIN (John Ramsden, 1979)
4. OUR GREAT ALLY FRANCE 1938-1940 (Philip Bell and Ralph White, 1986)
6. IMAGES OF AMERICA 1937-1939 (Peter Bell, 1996)