

Hain, Mark, Indiana University. "Resurrecting the Vamp: Cinema's Loss and New Media's Finding of Theda Bara"

While the Internet has significantly altered the availability and uses of information, predictions that more interactive new media would subsume older media forms haven't come to pass. Rather, "old" and new media interact in ever more complex ways, with the newer technology altering the contextual and discursive parameters, and thus the meaning, of older media. My paper will examine fan-created "tribute" video collages constructed from film clips and still images of the 1910s film star Theda Bara. The circulation of such materials enables a continued, if radically altered, presence for Bara in cultural memory, made all the more significant in that only a small fraction of Bara's films survive. What does survive, however, are hundreds of still images, which have made the digital leap from the archives and libraries that have preserved them, to gain reinvigorated life via their online accessibility.

I use my examination of these video collages to argue that media consumers have the ability and the desire to act as "amateur" archivists, thereby taking a more active role both in preserving cultural heritage and in repurposing cultural artifacts. While acknowledging the dire problem of film loss, I will also argue that such loss has actually allowed fans richer possibilities for appropriation and interactivity, heightening the impulse to use available artifacts to create fan-produced texts, modifying the relationship between consumer and mass media in unexpected ways. With no original text to compare them to, fans' assessments, interpretations, and productions exist in a state beyond "correct" or "incorrect," "resistant" or "compliant," but rather as culturally significant artifacts in themselves. I will emphasize the significance of this in analyzing how Bara's star image has been appropriated, particularly in the Goth subculture, as an empowering model of anti-hegemonic femininity.

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