The Most Dangerous Hobby in the World: Film Collecting in the Digital Age

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During his college days, John McElwee fell in with an avid movie collector known as Moon Mullins. By then an elderly man, Moon had for most of his life been accumulating 16 mm film prints. A lover of classic movies and an aspiring film collector himself, John heard about Moon from the small subculture of cinema buffs living in the town where he went to college and latched onto him as a mentor. At a time when most old films were still protected by copyright and studios were urging the FBI to prosecute individuals owning copyrighted films, movie collecting was a largely underground and somewhat dangerous activity. Indifferent to the risk and keen for a pristine print of *The Wolf Man*, *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers,* or *Red River,* John enthusiastically entered Moon's obscure world of celluloid intrigue. Within weeks of their first meeting, John was cutting classes to take excursions to condemned movie houses and backwoods barns, dank basements and rusted warehouses. John was on a fevered quest to recover the lost Edens of the Saturday matinee—the silvery cowboys on the prairie, sci-fi creatures untroubled by time, the dream-tortured monsters of horror.

There at the edge of the snowy woods in the hour of twilight, miles from another living soul, a Saturday movie house bloomed in the wild.

One such journey took place in winter. Moon told John that he had heard of a man deep in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina who owned an immense cache of old Hollywood movies and memorabilia. It was a snowy Thursday and the roads were treacherously slick and curvy. After almost sliding off the highway into a rocky ravine, John pulled over and refused to go farther. Moon, however, told the young man that he would guide him through the snow. John pushed ahead through the blinding whiteness, listening to Moon's admonishments on steering and speed. Finally, the two men reached their destination—a shabby mobile home decaying in front of a huge, freshly painted barn. They knocked on the door of the trailer. An old man wearing white pajamas and a black bathrobe appeared. His greasy hair was combed back like Bela Lugosi's in *Dracula*. Through rheumy eyes, he stared at them as if they were from another world. When Moon asked if he had any movies, the man led them

through the snow to the barn. It was brimming with silver canisters of film.

John doesn't remember the old man's name. What Moon purchased has also slipped his mind. What he does recall is that he soon found an original print of a Raoul Walsh Western from 1948, *Silver River,* starring an aging Errol Flynn. Before buying, John asked to watch a clip or two. The old man wordlessly walked out of the barn and into the falling snow; John followed. He saw at the edge of the woods a small building a little bigger than an outhouse, a makeshift projectionist booth. Inside was a polished 35 mm projector. While the old man threaded the film, John looked for where the movie would appear. The projector was aimed at the forest. The old man had hewed a swath through which the light could travel. At the end of this treeless corridor was a large white screen. It hovered in the falling snow like a phantom. Then, a beam of light streamed out of the booth, flowing through the flakes. There at the edge of the snowy woods in the hour of twilight, miles from another living soul: Errol Flynn in striking black-and-white. A Saturday movie house bloomed in the wild. Nineteen-year-old John became a child again, too confused by wonder to think of the disjointed miracle of the scene, of the sixty dollars he would soon pay for the film, of the fact that the snow was already turning to slush.

I met John McElwee several years ago, through a mutual friend. Knowing I was a film addict, my friend told me that I must meet this man who owned eleven hundred of them, housed two spacious theaters in his own basement, and lived among enough movie memorabilia to start a museum. I envisioned a classic cinematic eccentric, a Willy Wonka or a Doctor Doolittle. Instead, meeting me at the door of his modest brick ranch house was an ordinary looking fellow in his late forties, wearing old jeans and a T-shirt. John greeted me in a soft Southern voice that retained hints of courtroom oratory and elegant breeding. In his foyer I learned that he was a retired lawyer. With his refined manners and bookish air, he might have been a university professor on sabbatical. When he led me inside, however, I quickly understood why my friend had claimed that I would never in my life meet another person like John.

In a kitchen decorated in retro kitsch—like something out of *My Three Sons*—John casually took on the persona of an unassuming museum curator and began the tour. I entered into an art deco atmosphere similar to that of *The Black Cat*—sleek colors and chrome textures from the thirties. The walls throughout these vintage halls and living spaces were filled with original, 27 41 inch "one-sheet" movie posters backed in linen and beautifully framed, lobby cards displayed in their eight-part sequences, and holograms of film stars dancing in the parallax. Standing in corners were life-size 41 81 inch "three-sheet" posters—Power or Gable, Leigh or Shearer. Tastefully placed among the images were several glass showcases featuring smaller items from the days

of classic cinema—figurines from *The Wizard of Oz,* 3-D movie glasses, 8 mm cameras, and replicas of film properties. Two bedrooms had been converted to archives. One held movie stills, press kit photos, and letters from John Wayne and Deanna Durbin. Another stored more posters for which there was no wall space.

This was only the upstairs. When John led me into his basement, I felt that I was entering a subterranean temple. Lurid crimson velvet lined the descending stairwell. Out of the dark red stared the quivering images of yet more movie star holograms—vertiginous glances of Joan Crawford and Alan Ladd. At the bottom of the stairs was a windowless room lined in dark blue curtains. An old popcorn machine and soda fountain stood to the side. Three substantial, plush recliners faced toward the back wall, where there was a large movie screen, luminously white against the somber background. The projection booth, a roomy space, contained projectors for 35 mm, 16 mm, and 8 mm films as well as consoles for watching laser discs and DVDs. Adjoining this first theater was the corridor in which John stored his film collection on sturdy shelves. The library was stunningly heterogeneous, ranging from pre–Hays Code masterpieces (such as *A Free Soul*) to British Technicolor classics (*Scott of the Antarctic*) to early noir works (*I Walk Alone*). At the end of the corridor was a set of double doors leading to the second theater, a bigger room with a larger screen devoted to CinemaScope pictures. This room also contrasted the cavernous gloom of its burgundy curtains with the splendid brightness of its white screen.

Adjoining this bigger theater was yet another chamber housing original art based on classic films. In the center of the room was a table and chair from a famous Laurel and Hardy routine. Each corner featured a bronze-colored plaster bust of a famous movie monster: Dracula, the Wolf Man, the Mummy, the creature of Frankenstein. At the far end of the room an immense indoor water fountain percolated. I felt as though I had entered another era, one of reverie from which Boris Karloff could emerge and gaze.

It was a religious ritual, and *TV Guide* was his sacred text. John told me the curious tale of Moon Mullins and many other such stories, mainly to emphasize the weird and wonderful world that had recently passed away in the wake of DVD. The great days of film collecting, he claimed, grew out of a hunger for pristine original prints. Now, when digital technology can return movie frames to their inaugural purity, there is no need to scour the country for celluloid. The glory days of collecting are over. No more would men like Moon Mullins escort initiates to locations. No more would Flynn be reborn among the snowy pines.

As I heard John tell these stories about the collecting obsession and its recent decline, I felt a strange sympathy with all those wild-eyed cinephiles bent on a nitrate fix. Was

I drawn to these men because I, too, was hollowed by nostalgia and intent on escaping time's weight? Or was I pulled to these collectors because I sensed in them a noble purity, a saintly rebellion against temporal messiness?

As I found out from John and other collectors I spoke with later, the quest for celluloid purity almost always begins in childhood, when the innocent eye takes in the magic of cinema. John can still recall with accuracy the events surrounding almost every film he saw during his childhood: his anticipation on the day he was first allowed to watch a horror movie by himself, *Castle of Blood;* his ebullient mood on the Saturday afternoon of his inaugural sci-fi flick, *Konga;* his joy in beholding his first feature, *The Shaggy Dog*.

He saw these films in the late fifties and early sixties, sometimes in first-run form, sometimes in second. This was right around the time that television stations were starting to run their own versions of *Shock Theater,* a Friday night late-show devoted to screening classic Universal horror films, and John became mesmerized by these older movies. Though he could not yet read, John desperately wanted to study the *TV Guide*'s Friday night lineup, so he pushed himself to learn before he even began kindergarten. Once he mastered the words, he amused himself with a game. Upon receiving the *Guide* in the mail, he would page to the Friday night listing for *Shock Theater*, cover the titles of the movies, and read the descriptions underneath. The challenge was to try to guess the name of the movie based on the summary and list of actors.

But this was more than an idyll for John. It was a religious ritual, and the *Guide* was his sacred text. One day, when John was about ten years old he got a nasty gash over one of his eyes. Hearing John's screams, his mother ran outside and put him in the car. While she was pulling out of the driveway on the way to the hospital, John noticed the mail truck approaching. This was a Monday; the *Guide* was in the mailbag. He yelled for his mother to stop. He must have his magazine. Not wanting to upset him further, his mother wheeled around and met the mailman. He handed over the *Guide*. John took it with the hand that didn't hold a blood-soaked towel above his eye and opened it to the pages of the Friday night listings. He covered the title to the first *Shock Theater* entry. Basil Rathbone, Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi, and Josephine Hutchinson were the stars. The answer came to John instantly: *Son of Frankenstein*.

The world of cinema is for a child a solacing distraction from pain, a healing power. But what if this salve is denied? What if the bliss of nitrate establishes an intolerable gap between the day's ordinary occurrences and the extraordinary shades of the screen? What if movies don't heal the wounds of time but *cause* them, by

seducing viewers away from the present moment and into the vapors of ghosts?

John chose his college for its proximity to an independent television station devoted to showing old comedy shorts and features.

Once, as punishment for a transgression he can't remember, John was condemned to his room for an entire Friday evening. He would have to miss *Shock Theater* and one of the few Universal horror films he had not then seen: *The Invisible Man Returns*. John was informed of this punishment on Monday. He had all week to dread the agony he would face on Friday and he passed each night at dinner desperately proposing alternatives. He could be grounded for a month, he argued, or do extra chores, or even forgo watching *Shock Theater* all the next week. But his parents were firm. By Thursday evening, John was almost in tears; Friday night, still unable to move his parents, he was weeping pitifully. He was sent to his room, his dinner untouched. There he lay in his bed racked with despair. He did not sleep until after 1 A.M., just about the time the invisible man, played by Vincent Price, is given a blood transfusion and thus saved from death. To this day, John has never been able to watch *The Invisible Man Returns*. Forty years later, the memory is too painful.

Soon after his traumatic experience with *The Invisible Man Returns,* John began to buy films from the back pages of *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine. During the fifties, this magazine featured ads from Castle Films and Blackhawk Films, companies that sold, for private use, 8 mm silent comedy shorts and silent excerpts from horror features. Each month John purchased routines from Hal Roach's *Our Gang,* Laurel and Hardy, the Keystone Cops, and Abbott and Costello. He also picked up brief cinematic anthologies of scenes from *Dracula* and *The Wolf Man, The Mummy,* and *Frankenstein*. On a projector borrowed from his church, he watched these films in his bedroom whenever he wanted. He enjoyed total control over his moving images.

So began John's lifelong obsession: to own the movies he most loved, to turn circulating commodities into sacred objects. His biography as a collector from childhood onward took on a shape similar to those of numerous collectors throughout America. With the purchase of his first small reel, John felt a new identity emerge. He was no longer victim to the whims of television schedules and parental moods. He was a master of images, a magician of the visible. In his own room he mesmerized himself with shadow shows. During daytime in the classrooms and auditoriums of his school, he wowed his classmates with his cinematic wizardry. These public displays became increasingly sophisticated. By the time John was in junior high, he was supplementing his own collection of shorts with features from film rental agencies. With the permission of his teachers, he frequently planned screenings in the gym. He drew by hand his own advertisements and pasted them around the school a week in advance of

the show. He also designed tickets and sold them at the door the day of the movie. He introduced the movie by a brief lecture. Next he screened trailers and cartoons. And finally, the film itself, something "educational," such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* or *The Red Badge of Courage*.

John continued this practice in high school, even to the point of getting course credit for introducing and screening literary adaptations. When it came time for college, John chose his school not for its academic reputation but for its proximity to an independent television station devoted to showing old comedy shorts and features. His very first day on campus, John approached the provost and asked her if he could run a free film series. Permission granted, John launched a four-year project of his own making. When he wasn't lolling about his room catching old flicks on television, John was scheming over how to purchase his own collection of features. It was around this time that he met Moon Mullins.

Only weeks before he met Moon, John had saved up enough money to buy his first feature. An ad in the classified pages of a photography magazine listed ten films for sale. One was the 1935 *Mutiny on the Bounty,* starring Clark Gable and Charles Laughton, a personal favorite. Never thinking to ask where this copyrighted film came from, John arranged terms with the seller through a series of letters. He finally sent a money order for $175. Days later, John received in the mail a large brown box. It contained no return address. Before he even lifted the lid, he could imagine the smell of the film stock and the feel of slick strip in his hands. He brought the 16 mm reel to the light. He saw not a tight roll of black stock but an eternal spring of images. Without even deliberating, he cut the day's remaining classes, drove back to his parents' home, sixty miles away, and watched, in the makeshift theater he had made there, the first feature film of his collection. Fletcher Christian and William Bligh appeared on the flimsy white screen in his old room. They were now, in a real way, *his,* and their gazes glistened and their words intoned like never before.

John McElwee had believed there was only one way to acquire a film: mail order, from either a public, legally sanctioned distributor or a private, probably illegal, seller. Moon changed all of this. Within days of their meeting, he was taking John to barns, warehouses, back rooms and basements all over the Carolinas, revealing to him caches of fully copyrighted celluloid, movies that had no business being anywhere but in the archives of Universal or Paramount. John could walk with Moon into these secret spaces, choose a film he had coveted since before he cut his eye, take out two crisp $100 bills, and, if he asked no questions, walk out with a reel of pristine forms. Moon also introduced John to *Classic Images* and *The Big Reel,* weekly tabloids geared toward 8- and 16-mm-film collectors. These publications ran classified ads

from private sellers and buyers. Now John awaited these papers as he had once anticipated the *TV Guide*. Moon also arranged for John to be placed on select mailing lists. Once a week, he and a small group of serious, discreet movie collectors received in their mailboxes single sheets of paper from sellers too reclusive or paranoid to run ads in *Classic Images* or the *Reel*. These sheets contained typed or handwritten lists of usually ten to fifteen rare prints.

By the time most other collectors were getting out of bed, John had already purchased the choicest prints.

In these ways, John, still a college student, began to build his film collection. (All the while, he was acquiring other forms of film memorabilia as well—one-sheet posters, three-sheet posters, and lobby cards. He acquired these items largely by visiting shabby movie houses on the verge of closing and offering cash for their old advertising materials, which lay forgotten in closets and basements.) After earning his law degree, John found himself in a successful practice, with sufficient cash for building a serious collection. John's acquisitions became intense and systematic. The only barrier then between John and the film prints he most wanted was accessibility. He needed to learn how to get to the sellers before other collectors did.

John began to study his local mail system, hoping to find a way to get his hands on the *Big Reel* hours before anyone else. He found that instead of waiting for his mailman's noon delivery, he could show up at the sorting room at 5:30 A.M., knock on the door and ask one of the workers if he could have his mail. Since everyone knew him, he was always obliged. As a result, he was at his phone by 6:30 A.M., his well-marked *Big Reel* in hand. By the time most other collectors were getting out of bed, John had already purchased the choicest prints. Before long, letters to the editor in the *Reel* were complaining about a "southern collecting cartel" hoarding all the good pictures.

Around this time, John also started buying films at the two major annual film-collecting conventions—Cinecon, held at a different location each year on Labor Day weekend, and Cinevent, always in Columbus, Ohio, on Memorial Day weekend. Each convention generally opened its dealers' room on Friday at noon and kept it open until noon on Sunday. However, as John found out during his first round of conventions, the real buying and selling took place before Friday. Savvy collectors visited dealers in their hotel rooms the night before each convention to get the first look. After his first year at Cinevent, John began hovering in the hotel lobby on Thursday evening to corner the dealers before they even got to their rooms. He wasn't the only one. The hotel lobbies during these periods were tense, even frenzied. One collector running over another to get to the best dealer was not uncommon.

John told me that if I really wanted to understand the film-collecting world, then I

needed to talk to Don Key, founding editor of *The Big Reel*. John knew that Don would be attending the Western Film Fair in Charlotte, North Carolina, an event devoted to hard-core fans of Westerns, mainly serial Westerns and B-Westerns.

As I made my way down a sweltering Interstate 77, I recalled my many childhood Saturdays spent watching, in our dim air-conditioned living room, the adventures of Roy Rogers and Lash LaRue, Sunset Carson and Tex Ritter on our fuzzy black and white. My childhood affection for serials developed into an adult obsession with a handful of brilliant Westerns: *My Darling Clementine, The Searchers, Red River, High Plains Drifter*. Driving to the fair, I kept picturing hot lonely plains and throats parched with revenge. I imagined that I'd see in the hotel thin men hollowed with longing, wizened faces staring into a blistering abyss.

What I encountered instead were hundreds of well-fed men and women wandering happily about the cool lobby in expensive cowboy hats and soft cowboy boots. At the registration table, I was greeted by a buxom woman wearing a cowboy hat decorated with chartreuse and mauve feathers. She asked me if this was my first time at the convention. I said yes, and she welcomed me with a boisterous *howdy* then patiently explained to me the layout, pointing out the dealers' room, the various screening rooms, and the room devoted to the old Western stars. As I made my way toward the celebrities, I noticed that the reception area was filled with old saddles and whips, six-guns and sheriffs' badges, even bandannas. Children outfitted with cowboy hats and vests were flitting from item to item, giggling excitedly.

The stars' room was a large lecture hall. Sitting at a big table at the back were three elderly actors from the old serial Westerns. I didn't recognize them, but all three seemed to glow with joy as they patiently fielded questions from the generous audience. They answered inquiries about the big stars like Roy Rogers and Charles Starrett and held forth about stunts and costumes and love intrigues. Since I had an upcoming interview with Don Key in the dealers' room, I didn't hang around this Q & A for long, though I would have liked to. I was thoroughly enjoying myself. There was something exuberant about the Western fans and the stars they loved. I felt celebration in the air, a wholesome love of supposed goodness defeating alleged evil, a pre–Sergio Leone and extra–Anthony Mann sensibility for loopy Manifest Destiny, the man in white conquering the frontier.

Still, even though I was having a nice time, I felt that something was missing, something dark and real. Sure, there was enthusiasm, a hobbyist's amour for his subjects; but there was none of the desperate longing I had come to associate with hard-core collectors, none of the obsessed nostalgia that drew me to them. Where was

the wretched obsession? Where was the addiction? I felt that these fans could take their movies or leave them. They could take off their ten-gallon hats come Monday, don their gray polyester suits and go to their bank jobs or their Rotary Club meetings. These fans were not consumed with their passion, were not desperate for their fix.

The dealers' room was bright and airy. Children with toy six-guns skipped around the tables. Smiling, cowboy-hatted men sat behind sturdy tables filled with stars' biographies, press kits, stills, posters, and other memorabilia. Even happy-looking women were on the scene, selling their wares just like the men. I expected to find on each table a glass of fresh whole milk and a family Bible.

I found John at a table looking through press kits for B-Western serials. He took me around and introduced me to collectors who he thought may have interesting stories—last of all, Don Key. Don was a sturdy and jovial fellow, quick to smile and extremely courteous. He was there with his daughter to sell products from his new venture, a publishing house for biographies of Hollywood stars. He sold *The Big Reel* to a big publishing house back in the eighties, when film collecting began its downturn. He now runs a storage business as well as a movie-memorabilia shop.

Don and I were soon amiably settled in behind his table. In between customers, he answered my questions about his interest in movies and the heyday of collecting. He told me that his passion for movies began when he was a child, when every week his parents took him to comedies and Westerns. This passion heightened when he reached young adulthood and met Milo Holt. Holt had been collecting Westerns for thirty-five years. Five times each year, he called together his film-loving friends, and they would watch the gems of his collection. In Memphis in 1972, Milo organized a large gathering of fans: hundreds of old Westerns were shown and many stars attended, including Sunset Carson, John Barrie, and Tex Ritter. It was here that Don first discussed the idea of publishing a trade paper devoted to advertising movies for sale. Interest was high and soon after, *The Big Reel* went into production, with the first issue published in 1974. The magazine took off. Collectors who had been relying on word-of-mouth and secret meetings for years could now find in one place almost all the films for sale in America. *The Big Reel* was a huge success.

I questioned Don on the particulars of *The Big Reel,* and he persisted in giving me sanguine answers. He came to the right place at the right time, he said. He had been blessed by God. He was a part of a wonderful hobby. I was beginning to conclude that Don was simply part of the cheery atmosphere at the Western Film Fair. However, when I asked him about the FBI crackdown in the seventies, he gave me a cautious look. For a second, I thought he was going to ask me if *I* was FBI. He began to

speak circumspectly.

Film collecting in the seventies, he began, was the most dangerous hobby in the world. He had heard that the major movie studios gave the FBI $25 million to investigate illegal buying and selling of copyright-protected films. He couldn't substantiate this, but he felt fairly certain that the FBI had studio backing. Why else, he asked, had the agents come down so hard on collectors?

At the center of the collecting world, Don was in a position to know. Indeed, at one point during the early eighties, Don received a subpoena to testify against one of the collectors who had advertised in his magazine. Don refused; he was committed to protecting his customer. He was duly fined. He paid the money and went back to work, justified in his paranoia.

Hearing Don recount these risky experiences, I couldn't help but wonder if his buoyant demeanor had been hard-won. I began to suspect that he was covering some pervasive unease.

After talking with Don, I began to reevaluate all of the ostensible well-being at the Western Film Fair. Maybe everyone at the fair was hiding something and all of these million-dollar smiles were masks covering chronic obsessions—longings to be another more famous person, infantile desires to ride the sun-blanched range, violent urges to hoard all the reels of *Desperate Trails?* For an instant I saw these veils fall away, revealing personalities avid for but a scrap of real happiness, a solace more enduring than the quick grin of Johnny Mack Brown.

When he was aggressively collecting films in the seventies and eighties, John McElwee learned that *The Big Reel* and collector conventions were not necessarily the best places to go for the very best footage—the rarest titles and the most pristine prints. Some collectors, if they proved themselves to be especially serious and discreet, might get an unannounced visit from someone in a beat-up station wagon or van. From this vehicle a suspicious-looking man would emerge carrying a suitcase. He would knock on the door and ask if anyone in the house would like to buy some films. Some collectors were bold enough to let him in, and occasionally they were rewarded for their courage with a very rare print. Others, however, feared what was likely the case—that these films were stolen. These more cautious collectors, the ones who had turned the salesman away, had a deeper anxiety, though: was this dealer an undercover FBI man?

Almost all serious collectors knew that many of the films in their collections had been stolen right out of the archives of major movie studios.

From my conversations with collectors, I found out that prudent and imprudent collectors alike knew to be on their guard when it came to the law, for many of them had acquired their films in even more nefarious ways. Independent television stations, like those that ran *Shock Theater,* often possessed large collections of classic Hollywood features and shorts. When the station decided to change programming schedules, they would dump their old prints. Knowing of this practice, an enterprising collector might befriend employees at the station in hopes of getting word of the culling of these movies. If he got this information, the collector would show up at the dumping site with a rented van and take away a good haul. Or, even better, the collector would save the station the trip and take the films from the storehouse itself. This latter practice would often involve a small bribe. The bribes could get bigger. Sometimes an especially bold dealer would see a favorite and possibly rare feature or short on television. In no time he'd be at the station, chatting up an employee. During the conversation, he would casually ask where the films are kept. If the employee seemed relaxed about giving this information, the collector would flash a $100 bill and ask if he might take a look at the storage facility. Such a collector could walk out of the station holding a can or two of his dreams. He might have arranged to copy the films and return the originals, or he might have made a deal to keep the films forever.

Every serious collector during the seventies and eighties owned a slew of films still protected by copyright. Most collectors of course never dared to ask the dealers where their films came from. They were probably afraid of what they would hear. They knew only too well that some dealers had acquired their products through machinations that made bribing a television employee seem wholesome by comparison.

Almost all serious collectors knew that many of the films in their collections had been stolen right out of the archives of major movie studios. Suspect dealers could easily bribe studio security guards for nocturnal access to the film shelves. If certain canisters went missing for a few nights, who would know? If other films went missing permanently, to be replaced, maybe, with second-rate dupes, who would really care? But even these offenses appear minor when compared to stealing from the US Postal Service. Some dealers learned the mail routes by which first- and second-run films made their way from distributors to movie theaters. Through bribes or seedier means, these dealers figured out how to intercept these films, copy them, and return them.

Rumors swirled: FBI agents advertising films in *The Big Reel* or showing up at Cinecon and Cinevent to learn the names of the most active collectors and dealers; collectors being given a choice between turning in their dealers or having their films taken away; even the confiscation of the film collection of no less a celebrity than Roddy McDowall, just to get their point across. Fearing for their own collections—

often worth tens of thousands of dollars, not including the cost of labor and love—collectors began hiding their films in relatives' or friends' basements. They stopped answering the door or the telephone. They started spending hours alone in darkrooms. They became reclusive, eccentric, neurotic.

Every collector I spoke with had close friends who were harassed by the FBI and everyone knew someone who actually lost his collection. Still, each collector swears that he would do it all again, in spite of the danger. In fact, most enjoyed the danger. Most got off on the perverse energy of living on the edge. Most thrived on knowing that their lives, though surrounded by cold metal cans and phantom images and dead stars, were nervy, vivid, vital. Most felt, despite dwelling in a faded nostalgia of bygone styles and gestures, as if they were rebels for individual rights. Even though they had chosen to devote their lives to ghosts, spirits untroubled by time, they could still feel the paranoid tingle of the flesh.

The film collector is keen on the impossible marriage of dreams and data. The more I think about this vexed quest, the more I realize that the collector's true precursor is not Keats, the nobly self-conscious poet yearning to reconcile art and life, but the narrator of Poe's "Ligeia," a man so deeply in love with an ideal woman that he loathes females of flesh and blood. Almost every collector I interviewed was male and several of them told me that buying a pristine print is like finding the perfect woman.

Rather than Poe's sublimely decadent tale, then, a more apt comparison might be a character in the pale cinematic copy of Poe's story: Roger Corman's *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1965). In this piece of high camp, Verden Fell, played by the chronically fussy Vincent Price in unreal black satin, believes that his new wife, Rowena, has been inhabited by the spirit of his dead wife, Ligeia. But what begins as a tale of possession becomes a fantasy of wish fulfillment: Fell *wants* his new wife to become a vessel of the old. He is more fixated on the lost past than the present that shines. Hopelessly retrospective, he chooses to dwell in a sepulchre of phantoms.

But then, just when I believe that all film collectors possess the morbid disposition of that Poe hero, I think again of Moon Mullins leading John McElwee to the snowy paradise of *Silver River* and I return to the more luminous side of collecting, its fervid aestheticism, its efforts to remove objects from economic circulation and restore them to purposeless beauty. I believe the line between collecting movies and reading poetry is a fine one; the distinction is small between gazing at Novak and adoring a sculpted Madonna. Thinking these things, I again hold hard to my idea. The cinephilia of the collector, though it might be tainted with morbid escapism, can also rise to something much more, a transcendent power, a heroic hope for beauty beyond decay, beauty that

simply is of itself so, self-contained, with no other end than to be what it is: luminous, exquisite, inexhaustible.

Moon Mullins is now dead. John gave up collecting, thanks to DVD, and has sold most of his films on eBay, making a fair amount of money. He no longer scours the backwoods in search of a lost print of *Portrait of Jennie*. He doesn't travel to Cinecon or Cinevent anymore. Sometimes he'll even gently chastise those who still collect movies in our digital age. John swears that he doesn't miss collecting. He says his goal was to enjoy the best moving image possible. Now that he can get that image on DVD, there is no more reason to collect.

I ask John if he believes that something has been lost, some bizarre and wonderful counterworld teeming with crazed pilgrims of the image. He shakes his head and says, "Not really." I push a little, asking if his world now feels flat and boring. He says simply, "No, I'm glad to be through with that stuff."

John has decided to renounce celluloid for real cells, strips of film for striped petals. One day, John tracked this development, this liberation from cinema addiction, by telling me the history of his relationship to Peter Freund's *The Mummy* (1932). He first saw the film as a nine-year-old at his city's local theater, the Liberty Street Theater on Halloween. Then, it was a fevered dream, a fascinating panorama of seductive energies he could barely conceive. Later, John showed the film in one of his high school presentations. At that time, the film marked his burgeoning impresario powers, his persona as a magician of the visible. Still later, in college, John happened upon the film after a night of drinking. When he woke up, hungover, at a friend's house the next morning, he saw, through the haze, Karloff stirring his magic pool. The film was on television. John thought: "Well, there it is again, *The Mummy*. It's reassuring at this moment, when I don't know who I am or what I'm doing."

John bought a copy of the film. In this instance, the movie coincided with John's full flower-ing as a collector. Finally, in the mid-nineties, right around the time an original poster of the film sold for $500,000, John remarked to himself: "Here *The Mummy* shows up again, and I don't even care."

John's history of *The Mummy* is nothing less than a bildungsroman. At each juncture, *The Mummy* measured John's growth, his movement from innocence to experience, from ignorance to knowledge: his life. Choosing to see *The Mummy* in this light—and not as an endlessly retrospective lens back to adolescence—John admirably turns his cinephilia into a lesson for existence.

John continued to grow. For the first time in his life, he has a live-in girlfriend. He has subsidized a state-of-the-art movie theater at a local university. In this art deco showplace, he runs a weekly film series. He spends his days in the archives of small-town public libraries. He is compiling a scrapbook of movie ads from the thirties to the present, a pictorial history of movie marketing and reception. He has no desire to publish this work. He simply does it because he likes it. It is a form of play, a charming irrelevancy. It is as uselessly gorgeous as a mockingbird.

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