Reflection on Research Strategies in Cinema Studies: Writing a Historical Account of the Technicolor Company

For the second major assignment of Film Cultures I: Art and Industry, students were tasked with writing a historical account that would analyse and describe a person, event, institution or phenomenon related to the development of cinema. We were to accomplish this by accessing primary sources, engaging with them and actively shaping the found information into a persuasive story. I thus chose to explore the development and spread of colour film technologies for my essay, as both hand-colouring methods and photographic systems that enabled colour recording had been discussed in our lectures. I was curious to learn more about the competition and dynamics between these different systems so I used this assignment as an opportunity to look deeply at Technicolor, the most famous of the colour film companies, and inquire into its history, processes and practices in hopes of finding out why it became an industry leader.

Before beginning our assignments, students were provided with an introduction to primary resources by the Innis College librarian, Kate Johnson. She explained in depth what primary sources were and how we would find them in databases, such as the Media History Digital Library (Lantern), ProQuest, and the MPPDA archive, among others. A detailed research guide was also available through the library with links to subject-specific or publication-specific databases, microfilm holdings at Robarts Library and additional resources outside of the university’s purview, such as the TIFF archives and records held by the city’s public libraries.
From this basis, I felt readily prepared to begin my independent research, starting most basically with cursory keyword searches into Lantern and the ProQuest databases, though I largely limited the results using subject headings for motion pictures and media studies and specified non-academic publications like magazines and newspapers. I quickly found out and recorded many of the important words, synonyms, names and events I could search pertaining to Technicolor and colour film within Hollywood, including Trucolor and Cinecolor as well as Eastman Kodak. I had to make sure to use American spellings of words like ‘color’ since most resources were written in American English. I also went back multiple times to various databases to tweak search criteria in hopes of getting new results.

I additionally devised some questions to help me locate and evaluate useful research elements, since they were questions I had when I chose my topic and aimed to present and answer in my final essay, including how colour film works, what industrial impacts it had, how it competed with other media, and what statistics or records their were of the marketing or success of the different colour film systems. I mainly searched using a selective date range from between 1915, when Technicolor incorporated, and the mid 1950s when Technicolor’s monopoly on the film industry slipped dramatically. I would begin with general terms or combinations of keywords like Technicolor AND filming, or color film AND set design, and then looking year by year for records. I also filtered for publication type or combinations of types to try to find the most active periods of reporting or press within the larger time frame, or for sources published by or written by company officials.

I further located a few modern articles from contemporary film discipline publications such as *Film History* to provide a general understanding of the context for the importance of
colour film. This allowed me to see aspects which may not have been fully covered and that I was still curious about, prompting further research into new topics like reception of particular colour films like *Becky Sharp* (1934), the roles of company officials like Natalie Kalmus, or the exploration of bibliographies to find the first hand sources referenced by those works. This journal also proved indispensable for republishing an otherwise obscure internal report sent to Technicolor stockholders in 1952 which contained essential information on the company’s goals and growth statistics. Though I doubled back as with many of these sources to try to fill in knowledge gaps or to find earlier reporting on the events as they developed, this modern source uniquely consolidated data found across multiple issues of the *Film Daily Yearbook* and details from a physical copy of the report found only in the Columbia University Library.

It was very important for me to structure my essay around the resources that became available. Yet, I still constantly refer back to original questions to help me assess my results and to reveal where I required more evidence or understanding. I was determined to adjust and fine tune my efforts as much as needed to approach the topic from many different angles like aesthetics, economics, industrial impacts and public perceptions. I worked throughout the project to find connections and ways to relate individual pieces of information or research elements into a logical whole. One potential area for improvement however would have been to ask for more assistance from my professor, subject specialists, or librarians to find perspectives I may not have known about to write a more complete account. However, I did consult with my teaching assistant regarding my topic as well as my preliminary research. He approved the scope and initiatives I presented, allowing my to build on my initial findings. I also referred to library staff at Innis college with quick questions about particular resources like microform.
This more self-guided, trial and error process proved extremely rewarding and allowed me to find a wealth of materials using sites like Lantern and the various publication-specific databases. I became more adept as the assignment went on at sorting and finding relevant holdings that would provide useful information for the story I wanted to articulate. I was fascinated by what I was uncovering, and ended up using roughly double the number of sources that were required. I cited advertisements, industry magazine features and columns, newspaper articles, company publications and some modern scholarship to get a deeper understanding of the company, the impacts of the colour film market, and why colour mattered to the overall history of film.

Implementing all the research into a cohesive narrative was the hardest but most enjoyable part of the process. It required me to group the sources I found into useful categories to answer my research questions, contextualize the importance of the information, and create an overall flow between ideas that allowed for both description and analysis of the topic. The research revealed other contextual ideas that I wanted to note such as a larger political climate of antitrust action, and the potential for colour to add new meaning-making dimensions to film. To stay true to the historical focus of my account however, I could only mention them briefly. As with these examples, several sources I learned from did not make their way directly into my final draft, or led to dead ends and had to be reworked. Nonetheless, finding them taught me more deeply about colour film and helped me feel comfortable fashioning a historical account that could be accessible, interesting and comprehensive, going beyond just reiterating known facts or important dates.
Overall, the research experience was extremely engaging as someone who hopes one day to pursue librarianship as a career. I tried to use this essay it as an opportunity to learn more about accessing resources and documents, to develop my research skills, and also to challenge myself to sort through all the available information to do the kind of academic work we read and learn from as students, aiming to create my own ‘usable version of history’. It made me conscious of how the process of research and synthesis meant I was actively shaping a historiography by engaging these primary sources, explaining what I believed to have happened rather than assuming the goal was to tell a complete story or give only authoritative facts. Though I began with broad and extensive searches, I was able to hone my strategies enough to write an intensive and closely focused essay by utilizing the knowledge base I was provided with, building on the stories I located and assessed, and accessing the support that was offered to me by the department and the university’s library and research services.