

FilmMatters

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“Portrait of a Lady On-Screen: Self-Portraiture
Through Self-Reflexive Documentary in Agnès Varda’s
The Beaches of Agnès and Sandi Tan’s *Shirkers*”
by Bridget Bell



Finding the Deserted, Screening the Forgotten: An Interview with Deserted Films

By Holley Anne Brabble

Devin Orgeron and Melissa Dollman run a nonprofit based in Palm Springs, California, called Deserted Films. This project is dedicated to preserving home movies made in the Palm Springs area from the 1920s to the 1980s. This article is an interview conducted with Devin Orgeron and Melissa Dollman about their project, what it's like to run a project like this, and the impact the project has had.

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Deserted Films is a nonprofit based in Palm Springs devoted to preserving a unique kind of film: forgotten home movies saved on celluloid from the 1920s to the 1980s. Deserted Films' founders Melissa Dollman and Devin Orgeron are dedicated to liberating these films from their purgatory and reconnecting them to their region and context. I was lucky enough to be able to talk to them about Deserted Films and their mission to give these films new life.

Holley Anne Brabble: Please tell us about Deserted Films.

Deserted Films: Deserted Films grew, somewhat organically, out of our love for and desire to share home movies. We had both been collecting, writing about, and screening home movies (for friends, students, and audiences) for decades. In 2021, however, after some attempts to get another potential archival prospect off the ground, we realized we already had the makings of a (very small!) home movie archive around our home! The pandemic found us focusing some of our collecting activities on films shot in and around Palm Springs, California, where we have been living since 2019, so we even had some focus to our obsession. We founded Deserted Films in 2021 and incorporated as a nonprofit in July 2022. By 2023, we were a federally recognized 501(c)(3) nonprofit. We now house and care for over 2,500 8mm, Super 8, and 16mm films as well as a handful or two of things shot on or transferred to other formats, slides, souvenir filmstrips and View-Master reels, and other bits of ephemera. We maintain a website (<https://desertedfilms.org/>) featuring many of our films divided into useful, somewhat

idiosyncratic categories and we do public shows and presentations around the Coachella Valley (where Palm Springs is situated), at film and media conferences and symposia, and online. We love what we do, and we think of ourselves, in some ways, as grassroots organizers for the cause of LOCAL home movie preservation.

HAB: Why the focus on Palm Springs? What does documenting this area mean to you?

DF: Our name, of course, is a double entendre. We care for films that have been “*deserted*.” We find them in thrift stores, estate sales, auctions. But we are also focused on films shot in and around our Southern California *deserts* like the Mojave, and nearby Joshua Tree National Park. First, of course, the land on which Palm Springs is situated has been home to the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians for millennia. They were the first to welcome visitors attracted to the natural hot springs starting at least by the 1800s. Since then, Palm Springs has played a key role as a frequent desert destination for travelers from other states and abroad. A literal oasis in the sand, our luxury hotels, vacation homes, nightclubs, stunning mountain views, swimming pools, and easy outdoors lifestyle were a siren call to tourists. But it was also a haven for Hollywood folks eager to get out of the limelight and into the sunlight. Hollywood studios had rules in place that required contracted stars to be no more than two hours away. We focus on this region and on Palm Springs in particular because we wanted to create a centralized repository for amateur films made here. You would think, perhaps, that local historical societies would be the more natural place for films like these to end up. And they sometimes do. But small-gauge films (8mm, Super 8, and 16mm) require special equipment and expertise to assess. And many historical societies, for instance, are not in a position to hire professionals with those skills or maintain that equipment. It is simply too costly to be a priority (save for an odd collection here and there). Palm Springs is a magical place and visitors with motion picture cameras knew this. The films documenting the history of this place, however, are scattered around the country... and around the world. Our goal is to make them accessible to the world.

HAB: Can you walk us through your process of collecting/salvaging these films?

DF: We are always on the lookout for films and, to be honest, collecting comes rather naturally to both of us. It is really Melissa’s archival training that transforms our acquisitions from a potential hoard to a usable and searchable collection. We were more casual about things initially, for sure. But right when things started getting serious for Deserted Films, we had an opportunity to work with an intern, the wonderful Janeth Delgado (Summer 2024), a recent graduate of San Jose State’s Master of Library and Information Science program, who helped get our acquisitions into a database, which brings order to what had been handwritten (!) notes. As films come in, they are input into the database, assessed, numbered, stored, and potentially sent out for digitization. We work with a vendor in Raleigh, NC, Skip Elsheimer (A/V Geeks), who understands our needs and works with us to meet deadlines for shows, events, etc. We have done some low-grade digitization in-house, but A/V Geeks provides the quality we want for our shows. California Revealed, a statewide initiative that helps public libraries, archives, museums, historical societies, and other heritage groups digitize, preserve, and provide online access to historical materials, has also been

a key supporter. And really, that's the most important part of our collecting rationale. We want to share what we collect. We are not in the business of licensing footage. Rather, we put together thematic shows for the public and maintain a searchable website with high-quality digital scans of the films in our collection. It is a pretty hard line we have drawn, although we have justified individual requests for footage by local museums. Generally speaking, our hope is to avoid having any of this footage serve commercial purposes. We think about requests that are more historically or culturally inclined.

HAB: Your website mentions that you sometimes collect films outside of *Deserted Films*' typical parameters if you love the aesthetic. Can you describe that aesthetic or perhaps films you have made exceptions for?

DF: The thematic guardrails are up to help us keep from accidentally transforming our home into "the collection." And we are not really at risk for outgrowing our current space. This allows us to indulge other interests that help keep our shows varied and engaging. It is not just about aesthetic, though. Don't get us wrong, we love home movies that play with or (deliberately or accidentally) subvert formal convention. But it seems that many of our "side" collections fall into identifiable genres. Important genres for us are holiday films (we do a holiday-themed show every December), work parties (a particular obsession of Melissa's), and then those films that document generally underrepresented populations, such as people of color and the LGBTQ+ community.

HAB: On the *Deserted Films* website, a whole section is dedicated to Melissa's love of work party films. What can be learned from a stranger's party film?

DF: Ah, yes. Work and social club party films. This is, perhaps, a little-known genre of home movies and one we are very fond of. So, in the home movie age, cameras would tend to pop up for especially momentous occasions: baptisms, bar mitzvahs, birthdays, holidays, weddings, and travel. While we love party footage in general, this particular "flavor" of the work party in particular is fun because it is ever-so-slightly forced... a little bit awkward. And, we think, you can, on the surface of these films, begin to pick out the complexities of office and/or corporate politics just by watching how co-workers interact. Social club parties, on the other hand, can capture good works by club members in the community, as well as drunken festivities and group outings. We love these films! They were often pretty elaborate affairs, too. One of our favorites is a 1961 Chrysler Company picnic where attendees, dressed in Western garb, were adorned on arrival with a specially made Western hat (they had them made for men, women and children and had a couple of different styles as well!).

HAB: Why does "ephemeral" film fascinate you? How does this specific type of film help reconnect us to our history?

DF: We both love film of all sorts. But there is something uniquely magical about film with purposes that are not commercial. There is something very direct and also very profound about a popular technology so closely tied to memory and the recording and preservation of moments. This appeals to us and, we find, it appeals to a lot of people that have never thought about it before. One of the reasons we love putting on live shows for folks is that it allows us to bear

Figure 3: A title card from a vintage 8mm home movie, *Palm Springs!*.

witness to audience responses. Palm Springs is a place that really thinks a lot about, celebrates, and (to a degree) mythologizes its past: especially its connection to Hollywood and its reputation as a sandbox for architectural experimentation. And the stories that are told here are often supported by the same several hundred photographs that our storytellers have pointed to for decades. Home movies provide an interesting and animated alternative to these oft-repeated narratives, and they are capable of stirring different shared memories and of inspiring new stories about our legacy. We also enjoy how they get us to think about our present and our future. These are moving images that were on the brink of disappearing (or ending up as stock footage) before our intervention. What will happen to the images we are collecting and creating on our current technologies? Home movies make audiences think about this, and we think it is a very positive consideration.

HAB: What does the process of returning home movies to their communities look like?

DF: So, you can't really repatriate most home movies, although we do make good-faith efforts to find their makers and their families. Research is guided by what can be gleaned from the object itself or, if one is really lucky, notes tucked inside. Is there a name on the film's box or can? Are there details in the footage, such as an address on a mailbox to explore or recognizable landmarks that can



Figure 4: Melissa Dollman inspects film at a Community Archiving Workshop (CAW) event.



Figure 5: Devin Orgeron inspecting film.



at least narrow down a family's location? The more critical idea for us is this idea of regional collection. If a generation of home movies has outgrown its initial usefulness (to entertain and serve as reminders to their makers and their families), we feel obliged to guide these materials into their next stage of usefulness. They now tell a more *collective* story of place and time.

HAB: Should other communities be starting up projects like Deserted Films?

DF: We are not alone in our commitment to regional collection. There is good precedent for it around the country and around the world. But we do worry a bit that we are the tail end of a generation of folks who see the value in this material. It is another reason for our commitment to public home movie events. We want people to recognize the cultural value of these artifacts.

HAB: What's next for Deserted Films?

DF: And this [previous answer] ties directly to some of our plans for the near future. One of our key missions is to ignite an interest in small-gauge motion picture film with younger creatives in our area. So, we are cooking up a scheme to get Super 8 cameras in the hands of junior high kids, asking them to document their community. We would show them a bunch of stuff from the collection and give them some training, but the potential, here, of activating an interest in younger folks and getting them to think about our history... this seems like a real opportunity. And it would be fun, too! We are in the early stages, but we love the idea of a bunch of twelve-year-olds running around town with vintage cameras! We are also working on a project that would involve QR codes posted at sites around Palm Springs that would, when clicked, bring up amateur moving images of that location from previous years. Both of these are pretty ambitious projects, but we think we are in a city that would be interested in supporting these and similar efforts. We will continue to collaborate with other cultural heritage groups in the area, too, of course. We have been really impressed (surprised, even!) at how much interest our events and efforts have generated.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Holley Anne Brabble is a fourth-year student at the University of North Carolina Wilmington studying Film and Creative Writing. She enjoys watching and writing about film, as well as creating her own original screenplays. She recently completed her first original short film *Balzarina* (2024) and looks forward to spending more time on set and continuing her educational and creative endeavors.