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Life Suspended: Film Archives as Cryotechnology

This presentation traces various discourses of 'life' connected to cinema, and their role in the film archive particularly. What kind of life do these discourses address? There are at least two interconnected discourses of the film archive from the very beginning, one describing human life as inscribed and preserved by the medium, and one of a non-human life in the technology itself. The early reception of cinema abounded with reactions that death was now no longer final, as life was archived as such and would continue in a celluloid state.

However, these discourses imply that cinema was a form of life only when projected. In its archived form, film was seen as life in a latent state. Between the inscription of life – the analysis of movement in shooting – and its reanimation in projection, life was suspended indefinitely. It thus resembles cryotechnics in its ambition to suspend life with a future reanimation in view. As all organic substances, film is better preserved at low temperatures (if not necessarily below zero). Film in the archive doesn't display motion, but consists of separate single frames. The single, static frame is a *frozen* image. This qualitative shift between motion and stillness, referring both to film's role in the archive and to the halted movement in projection, is often informed by metaphors of ice. The frozen image or the single frame displays the archival dimensions of film, as its ephemerality is suspended, and allows for a verification of the physical image in storage. Peter Wollen engages the metaphors of fire and ice to address the mutual exclusion between stillness and motion: Fire melts the ice, but ice extinguishes fire when it melts.