FILM RESOURCES

PRINT VS. DIGITAL IN A TIME OF TRANSITION

Online research tools have come a long way since the early days of the internet, boasting unprecedented speed and convenience. Will they make traditional film reference books redundant, or are online resources too unreliable to replace print altogether? PETER GUTIÉRREZ *investigates.*

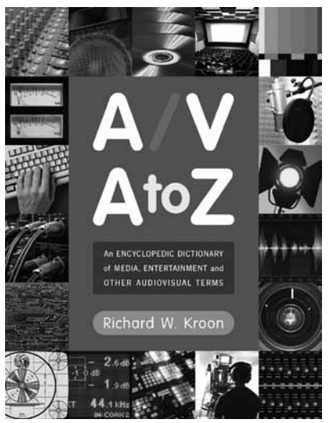
THE JOY OF REFERENCE BOOKS

I'd like to blame it on my workload, but the truth is that I'm just lazy: for a supposed media educator and critic, I rarely consult the reference library I've built up over the years, instead turning to the internet for more and more of the information my work requires. Well, perhaps not so much lazy as spoiled. After all, electronic resources have grown more robust and reliable over the past decade, so for a print reference book to stand out as a must-use – let alone a must-own – it really needs to strike me as special in some way.

That's just what happened, though, when I received a copy of Richard W. Kroon's *A/V: A to Z*, subtitled 'An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Media, Entertainment and Other Audiovisual Terms'. My first impression concerned sheer size: with nearly 800 pages covering 10,000 terms, it seemed well suited to a weightlifting program. Or, more generously, I thought it might make a good research backup if I lost internet service. But then a funny thing happened: I picked up the book and started reading. And the more I read, the more impressed I became. This was not a crusty tome primed for dust collection, but an outpouring of knowledge that seemed to encompass the entire multidimensional field in which I'd chosen to work. Opening the book at random, one finds that the same page that includes the very basic term 'off-camera' also includes 'Ofcom' (the important UK body that is influential in media literacy circles) and even 'Odorama' (the scratch-and-sniff gimmick from John Waters' 1981 film *Polyester*). Similarly, the same spread that defines 'Fast Fourier Transform' ('a mathematical algorithm commonly used in signal processing and image compression') features separate entries on 'fan fiction' and 'fandub'. Even more impressive, a nearby entry on 'fantasy', which as a know-it-all I expected to gloss over, insightfully mentions *Rambo* (Ted Kotcheff, 1985) in the same breath as *Cinderella* (Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson & Hamilton Luske, 1950).

Suddenly I felt like a student all over again, exploring an exhilarating world of ideas courtesy of Kroon's book, which somehow managed to be sophisticated, authoritative, comprehensive and fun all at the same time. As I continued reading, I noticed another process at work: I was learning *tangentially* – that is, I was stumbling across interesting items that I wouldn't have bothered navigating towards if presented online. This was odd, I thought, since this style of reading is usually associated with the nonlinear presentation of information on the web. Perhaps I was tapping into an older tradition of sorts: the autodidactic impulse that's often quite active in children, as evidenced by all the anecdotes adults tell of reading reference books cover to cover as children in some half-mad rush to absorb as much raw knowledge as possible.

So had I written off the standard film reference book prematurely, dismissing it as being too out of touch and dry in tone? Maybe. Still, these days, what was the real value of such books to media educators and their students? A closer examination of the reference materials now available in print – and how readers are using them, often in conjunction with their online counterparts – shows that yes, these have evolved and remain highly relevant.



Or as James Monaco, author of the landmark *How to Read a Film* (the book that inspired me to study cinema thirty years ago) put it when I asked him to contrast the function of print and electronic reference tools:

> *For access, if you know what you are looking for, nothing beats digitised, indexed text. But when you don't know what you are looking for... hit the books. It's not either/or; it's both/and, yin/yang.*

MEDIA ON MEDIA: TRADE-OFFS IN REFERENCE RESOURCES

The advantages of online resources for film study are obvious, if not compelling: accessibility, hyperlinks that make other resources instantly accessible and the ability of content providers to update text in a timely manner. Most glaringly of all, such resources – as well as CD-ROMs and DVD-ROMs – can provide information about moving-image media *through* moving-image media. In pedagogical terms, they can teach through *showing* as well as *telling*. In addition, today's point-and-click media-making software helps teach the meanings of some key terms through actual production: beginning students learn what a zoom or a voice-over is because these options are right there in front of them.

It's these advantages that can create the impression that print reference books, in comparison, are unwieldy vestiges of the Cretaceous period. Indeed, Julie Bain, a teacher-librarian at a secondary school in New South Wales, notes that print texts 'are generally out of date and haven't been borrowed for some time', and that among the English teaching staff, 'it appears that nobody uses film reference books in either researching the content of their teaching or in preparation for their lessons'. In a sense, this is more than understandable: a solid online source can – and probably should – contain many reference-like elements: a clear organisation, accurate sources and contributors, and features such as indices and glossaries – that help obviate the need for reference works per se.

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Bain notes that the teachers at her school prefer using the *australianscreen* website ‹http://aso.gov.au/›, because it *provides loads of useful information and a searchable database. Because it is a site especially for education it seems the most used resource when it comes to teaching documentaries, biography, even television and advertising.*

Katy Marriner, a Victorian secondary teacher and frequent contributor to *Metro* and *Screen Education*, also singles out this resource. Based on Bain's description, I was wondering whether the site might also be helpful to students in need of a reference resource, and a quick check confirms that it should be. The glossary alone, which draws its definitions from the National Film and Sound Archive's glossary of audiovisual terms, would appear to be quite useful in this respect – but just in case it's not, it offers a link to another glossary, this one from the British Film Institute.

Gary Simmons, who until recently worked in the education unit at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) – itself an inspiring hands-on learning resource, as I discovered on a trip earlier this year – identifies four websites that he favours:

- *Senses of Cinema* ‹http://www.sensesofcinema.com›, an online journal with a staggeringly broad 'Great Directors' bank of articles
- *Bright Lights* ‹http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/›, which provides easily searchable journal articles of very high quality
- ATOM's own site for *Metro* magazine ‹http://www.metromagazine.com.au›, with its wide array of downloadable study guides.
- Filmsite.org, which to me is the most purely reference-like, with its far-ranging yet remarkably knowledgeable lists (which emphasise both film history and film 'bests').

This last online resource is the one that I use most in my own writing and research. But is it really intended for teachers and students, or more for film buffs? With this in mind, I decided to ask the site's senior editor, Tim Dirks, how Filmsite.org has been employed in an educational context over the past fifteen years.

The site has been used for content, validation, [and] for an introduction to 'classic' or older films. I've heard that teachers have recommended the site, although they say that internet sources are questionable and sometimes cannot be quoted. I've had some schools ask for entire sections of the site (Film History, for instance) to be reproduced into packets to be distributed as 'texts' for students. Often, the site has been included on lists of resources for specific films in course curricula.

By 'validation', Dirks means that the inclusion of a title in one of the 'greatest' lists on the site can help engage some young people with black-and-white and comparatively low-production-value films – as it turns out, *that* may be the ultimate value of such lists beyond simply prompting arguments among cinephiles.

For students who show a strong bias in favour of internet-only resources, you might want to mention that Dirks himself makes use of print books, or online

excerpts of those books, for his own research. And although he might also look up specific data such as an actor's name via The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and other web sources, he notes that he's 'always careful to double-check because they are often inaccurate'. Clearly, the issue of accuracy is one that consistently comes up regarding online sources in general, not just those related to film. Indeed, when information on a fairly obscure film or filmmaker is in short supply on IMDb, I've been known to head to Wikipedia (see, I told you I was lazy) – despite the fact that the two instances where my *own* name comes up vis-a-vis film are both inaccurate.

There's the persistent impression that online sources are inherently suspect, a popular view that is not apt to be revised anytime soon. The apparent evidence lies in the breadth of information online (with so much content to manage, there's less quality control) as well as its up-to-date flavour (in the rush to make content available, mistakes are often made).

Yet are film reference sites inevitably inaccurate, or at least *more* inaccurate than bound books? Greg Guro, who studied film in college in the 1990s, told me that he 'found print books to be mostly useless. Sometimes laughably so. There was a book that mentioned *Viridiana* [Luis Buñuel, 1961], but confused flies with bees ... symbolically, about the most idiotic mistake one could make.' It's not hard to imagine that had such an error been posted online it might have been caught and corrected in a matter of days, if not hours, given the prominence of Buñuel as a filmmaker.

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I conduct film studies pretty regularly in my English classes, particularly in my twelfth grade humanities class. The school library has a good collection of film reference and criticism books, but I go for IMDb and the web every time. Many of the films I teach tend to be 'new classics' and therefore not yet in the school print references.

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

With all their shortcomings relative to their alternatives, what do reference books have to offer those studying film below, say, the undergraduate level? To answer this question, I decided to conduct an informal but eye-opening survey of titles and series with a view to evaluating their possible roles in teaching and learning.

The first thing I learned was that the field is dominated by a handful of titles that, in many cases, have an international following. One of these is *Film Art: An Introduction* by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, which Simmons cites as an 'old favourite'. Brett Lamb, who teaches media from Year 9 to 12 in a public high school in Victoria, is even more effusive, describing the book as 'an incredible resource which was extremely useful when I first started teaching', and adding 'I always direct students who want to learn more about narrative theory to this resource'. Another 'definitive' reference title is David Thomson's *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, a library mainstay since the 1970s that, because of its enduring intelligence, shows no signs of being outdated. And speaking of dictionaries, Kroon himself admits, 'If I'd read Ira Konigsberg's *The Complete Film Dictionary* before I started writing *A/V: A to Z*, I wouldn't have started.'

What else could be added to this list of cornerstone-style titles? In the US, Leonard Maltin's annual *Movie Guide* tends to be a perennial bestseller, but I find it to be rather bland, and somewhat predictable in its evaluations. A similarly popular and comprehensive but decidedly sharper title is the *Time Out Film Guide*, which is also revised every year.

Worth drawing attention to is the fact that many of these titles, including those by Bordwell and Thompson, Thomson, and Maltin, are available as ebooks. This trend points to what one hopes will someday be a false dichotomy between print and electronic reference; instead, we can imagine a product with the former's credibility and the latter's portability and affordability. No longer subject to the elongated publishing cycles of print, not to mention the manufacturing costs, such reference 'books' could be updated or corrected as needed. As Lamb explains, 'Teachers and students will still be using the same references from the same publishers – the only change will be the format.'

NEW APPROACHES, OLD FAVOURITES
SOME RECOMMENDED REFERENCE TITLES

International Film Guide
by Ian Smith

The term 'reference book' tends to evoke the slightly fossilised. That's not the case, however, with this annual volume, which should appeal to students who are into the current film scene. A solid mix of readable style and 'insider' reportage, this series reflects cinema's vibrant diversity. The heart of the book is its impressive world survey, which encompasses roughly seventy nations.

Akira Kurosawa: Master of Cinema
by Peter Cowie

International Film Guide's founding editor, Cowie has produced a stunning reference biography full of production sketches and key shots from Kurosawa's films. In many reference works, illustrations are simply adornments, but not so here – indeed, a book like this can help students get a firsthand sense of what is, after all, a medium of images.

Starstruck
by Ira Resnick

Clint Eastwood Icon
by David Frangioni

Continuing with the idea that some of the most valuable reference books provide *visual* data, it should be noted that the vintage posters in Resnick's book are not merely for fans – they're for film historians, budding and otherwise. Similarly, Frangioni's advertising-based book is not simply a celebration of an enduring star but an exhaustive resource on movie marketing. Also, such books reproduce artwork at a size and quality beyond the typical computer monitor – another reason not to abandon print.

The Dark Knight
by Craig Byrne, et al.

This offers good argument for why shooting scripts should be considered reference works. Here, stills in the margins show *how* a particular script passage was ultimately realised, while generous examples of production art round out the package. (For younger students, *The Art of Megamind* by Richard von Busack, with its emphasis on character designs and how settings are conceptualised, is the perfect intro to the elements and process of cinematic art direction.)

Film Isms ... Understanding Cinema
by Ronald Bergan

Film: A World History
by Daniel Borden, et al.

Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction
by Patricia Aufderheide

When your shelf space or budget is a concern, consider one of these remarkably concise surveys. The inviting Bergan and Borden titles are practically page-turners, and Aufderheide's book, part of Oxford's 'Very Short Introduction' series, is dense with facts and intelligence.

Roger Ebert's Movie Yearbook
by Roger Ebert

The 100 Greatest Looney Tunes Cartoons
edited by Jerry Beck

Reference works based upon criticism offer unique teaching possibilities in that they provide models for writing about film as well as overviews of their topics. Ebert, by including special reports and interviews, seems particularly intent on making sure his annual volume summarises the entire year, not just collects his reviews. Beck's book inventively turns the idea of a single know-it-all author on its head: experts from various fields, from technology to musicology, hold forth on a single cartoon that corresponds to their areas of expertise.

VideoHound's Golden Movie Retriever
edited by Jim Craddock

The Oxford History of World Cinema
edited by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith

The Rough Guide to Film
by Richard Armstrong, et al.

Need one comprehensive title that can function as authoritative reference *and* a reservoir of writing and research ideas for students? If so, these (very different) titles are all highly recommended. I've been using the massive *Movie Retriever* for fifteen years, and see why its playfulness and multiple indices make it a school library favourite. The supremely detailed Oxford tome doesn't cover films since 1995, but its thoughtful topical features could help it double as a basic textbook. *The Rough Guide* is more accessible, with generous sidebars supplementing its director-based organisation and highly engaging writing style.

Film Noir: The Encyclopedia
edited by Alain Silver, et al.

The Film Genre Book
by John Sanders

Some reference books are simply great reads – students may open them to look up a single fact and not be able to put them down. Those published by Overlook consistently fit this category, and its handsome volume on film noir is no exception. I also can't praise Sanders' book enough. Although better suited to advanced secondary students and undergraduates, it deftly mixes standard reference elements with a media-literacy sensibility.

The Cinema of Australia and New Zealand
edited by Geoff Mayer & Keith Beattie

The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia
by Peter Dendle

Dracula in Visual Media
by John Browning & Caroline Picart

Reference books can help educators develop curriculum and plan screenings. This is true of well-researched critical studies such as Mayer and Beattie's, and surveys of high-interest topics such as Dendle's or Browning and Picart's. The publisher of the latter two, McFarland, actually has scores of fascinating titles on various niche topics that might spark teaching ideas.