

Alejandra Martinez

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Whatever Happened to Material Film Heritage? An Examination of Movie Prop Preservation

1. Intro

From Dorothy's ruby slippers skipping down the yellow-brick road in *The Wizard of Oz* to the Michael Myers mask moving slowly into the light during *Halloween*, there's no question that some of the most memorable moments in movies involve objects. There is an emphasis on materiality in films and filmmaking that is inseparable from the films themselves, making them an integral part of film history. While there have been strong preservation efforts to keep certain materials in good condition, there have also been challenges along the way. In this paper, I will attempt to examine how film props have been preserved in the past, how the physical preservation of materials used in films directly impacts film history, and what efforts are being made to preserve film beyond celluloid today.

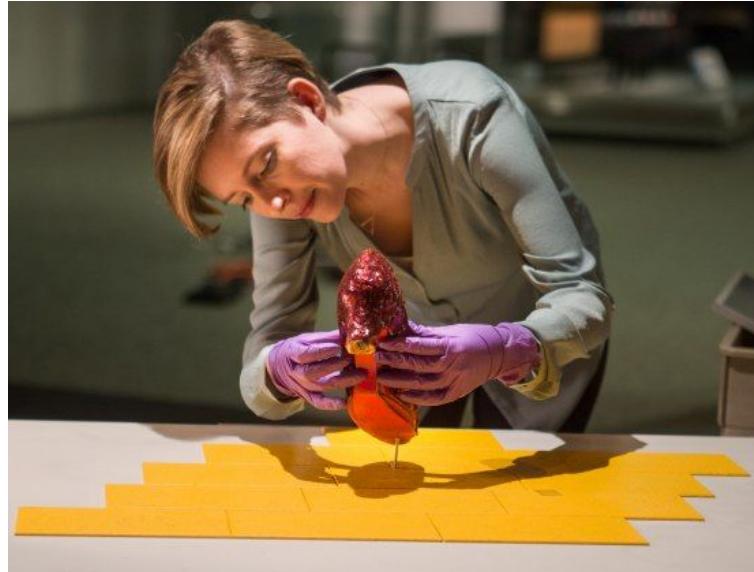


Figure 1- *Dawn Wallace, a conservator at the Smithsonian, examines the Ruby Slippers.*
(Smithsonian)

2. The Stuff that Dreams are Made Of

To understand how film props are preserved, we need to first understand what exactly some iconic film props are made of. For example, an egg from the movie, *Aliens*, is made of four materials according to the Smithsonian's description: wax/latex, metal, and plaster. (National Museum of American History) E.T., the heartwarmingly strange extra-terrestrial, was made out of aluminum, fiberglass, polyurethane, and foam rubber. (TIME) While it can be a bit disheartening to render iconic pieces of films into simple materials, it's important to remember that while memory can save an object for generations through abstract means, the physicality of these objects needs to be acknowledged. The fact that most movie props are made of multiple materials with their own conservation needs and issues is a tricky one to navigate, especially when it comes to practical solutions.

Take, for instance, everyone's favorite pair of red heels -- Dorothy's slippers (see Figure 1). After being on display continuously since the late 1970s, in 2016 The National Museum of American History reached out to the public to help fundraise for conservation efforts to save Dorothy's shoes. The materials used to create the slippers in 1938 were hard to identify in some cases, and already deteriorating rapidly in others. As conservator Dawn Wallace explained in a post on the museum's blog, the slippers were an especially challenging case:

"To conserve and preserve the slippers, we must consider each material that make up the slippers. For example, the sequins themselves are made of two different materials, a gelatin body coated with a cellulose nitrate lacquer. Steel nails hold the heel caps to the heels. Overall there are more than 12 different materials that make up the slippers and we need to understand how each material has aged over the past 80 years, their current condition, and how they interact with the environment, individually, and as the whole slipper." (National Museum of American Heritage)

It seems that even objects imbued with their own kind of magic still need help from conservators and museum-goers to help them survive. Dorothy's ruby slippers were able to be saved thanks to a successful Kickstarter campaign and recently went back on display in October of 2018 after thorough treatment. (National Museum of American Heritage)

While the ruby slippers found their own happy ending (for now) in the real world, there are other props from film that haven't been as lucky, either because of their initial creation/inception, or because they have simply fallen through the cracks. Whether it's through dissociation, low-budgets, or an indifference for the object at the moment the film was being made, there are some film props that haven't been able to be as lucky.



Figure 2 - *A plaster model of the “Bruce” shark from JAWS is removed from its old home -- a junkyard.* (Turner)

III. Whatever Happened to the JAWS Shark? And Other Mysteries

When JAWS wrapped filming, the three different sharks, or “Bruce” (named by director Steven Spielberg) animatronics were simply cast aside.

“...by the time they finally finished shooting Jaws, saving Bruce simply wasn't a priority. ‘We were in deep trouble,’ he says. ‘The studio was reluctant to make the movie; they had no confidence in it. When we came back, they just dumped the sharks in the back lot, and they just rotted away.’” (Turner)

Unfortunately, this can be a common occurrence when it comes to movies that would end up turning into part of the American film canon. Take, for instance, the iconic Michael Myers mask mentioned at the beginning of this paper. When the movie was made in the late 1970s, no-one on

the set expected it to become the iconic film it is today. This means that for a good while, the mask was kept in an Elvis Presley tin. (Cavanaugh)

Now, because of this improvised storage that has been happening for decades, the face that once redefined the horror genre and struck terror into countless movie-goers is terrifying for another reason. The mask, as you can imagine, is greatly degraded -- the white paint has become discolored, tears around the eyes and mouth have begun to build up, and the hair seems to be matted onto the mask even more so than it originally was (see Figure 3 below). While we can't blame people for not having the foresight to save props, or the knowledge or resources to donate them to a facility that can restore them, it's still somewhat troubling to think about.



Figure 3 - *The Michael Myers mask from Halloween is in tough shape after years in a tin box.*
(Cavanaugh)

If action had been taken sooner, would we be able to have a more intact, wholistic version of that iconic mask, or those animatronic sharks? In the end, we may never know. For now, there's comfort for at least the sharks. In 2016, a fourth "Bruce" was found, presiding over a junkyard. The owner of the yard donated him to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, who were going to do conservation research and keep the sole-surviving shark in cold storage for the time being. (Turner) While Michael Myers mask and all three Bruces were subject to oversight and uncertainty at the time, what would've happened if the filmmakers knew what their movies would become? If we knew the cultural worth of a film while it was being made, would our approach to conservation efforts change? The answer is a complicated mix of yes, and not really.

IV. A New Hope - For Props

In my research, I've found that newer film props, particularly those that are part of bigger film franchises, have better luck than their older counterparts. It seems that as long as your studio is still working on adding to the franchise and knows the cultural worth of these objects, the props in question will be taken care of, or at least sent to the studio archive until they're needed on set again. I was lucky enough to speak to Madlyn Burkert, the archivist at Lucasfilm -- the studio behind *Star Wars* and other George Lucas films, such as *Indiana Jones* and *American Graffiti* -- and she was able to provide some solid insights into contemporary challenges with conserving film props.

Even in working with film props straight from the sets of the latest installments in the Star Wars franchise, Ms. Burkert explained that the primary goals for film props haven't changed much. "I've noticed that overall....they're really designed and built with the idea that they will accomplish the goal of whatever's needed on screen but the materials that are used aren't necessary looked at as long term, archival quality," she said. (Burkert) In a collection so large, and that's still in use, the first concern is about the quantity of objects, and not necessarily the condition. "It's more about collecting than about materials treatment," Ms. Burkert explained over the phone. "[It's] more like anticipating what types of items someone might want reference for in the future." (Burkert)

However, although the day-to-day work at the Lucasfilm archives doesn't necessarily revolve around materials treatment, there have been moments when Ms. Burkert has had to work to make props or costumes archive-friendly. One day they received a costume in the archive. "This was a soft good, you know, made out of like silk and linen," she explained. "And to make it fit well on a mannequin, someone, uh, took carpet tape to tape some pieces so it would look styled properly." She was new at the time, and horrified, but luckily with the help of a conservator, they were able to strategize to save the costume. "She ended up using a small amount of alcohol to try and pull off as much of the sticky residue, however some of it didn't end up coming off right away so she took a piece of sturdy, neutral cotton and sewed it over the sticky part."



Figure 4 - *Lucasfilm archivist Madlyn Burkert handles a blaster from the Star Wars films.*

(StarWars.com)

There is also some uncertainty for materials in the archive because they are often still being used because, as I mentioned earlier, *Star Wars* films are still being made. What this means for the archive, however, is that the items can only be treated as archival objects to a certain extent. Since they can always be called back to set, there's no real way to make sure certain props are okay to treat in a more archival manner. Additionally, there are some tricky pros and cons that come with this as well. “For instance, if I put a blaster on display, and then for some reason it gets damaged, I can send it back to the props department and know that they’ll repair it to be film-ready,” she said. (Burkert) So in certain cases, treatments may not be traditional, archival approaches, but use more practical and pragmatic ones instead. For what it’s worth, it’s important to acknowledge that Ms. Burkert’s work at the Lucasfilm archive is highly

specific to the movies being made, and to the conditions that coincide with that and her experiences aren't typical of other studio archives.

Yet, these insights can provide us with an idea about what preservation and treatment looks like in a contemporary film archive, and what it could look like as more franchise films from Marvel, Disney, and other companies continue to come out in theaters, and as the props from these newer films find their place in the collective imagination.

V. Conclusion

As we've seen throughout the course of this paper, the treatment and conservation of film props and materials can be all over the place. From being left behind in a tin, to being lost over a sea of junk for years, to being stored carefully in a studio archive until it's time to be used again, all of the objects I've examined here have taken all kinds of journeys. In the case of older films who didn't have the 20/20 hindsight of the past to realize they were going to be part of the American film canon, some of these cinematic treasures are lost forever, or at the very least severely damaged. We may never be able to see Michael Myers's mask in all of its former glory, or experience the true source of terror from *JAWS*, but there is still hope. There is hope in the strides made to conserve what's been left behind and salvage our material film heritage as much as possible. We might not have the original Bruces, but we can have a mold cast from their likeness; we can have the newer *Halloween* masks, even if they aren't the original Shatner mask that sent chills down our spine when we first met Michael.

There is a certain kind of hope in the measures being taken at institutions like the Lucasfilm archives, where, with the full knowledge of their film props' cultural worth, materials

are being taken care of (well, as much as possible when the props are still considered in use).

Although many, many films, filmmakers, and studios do not have the same kind of privilege or resources as the Lucasfilm archive, these measures could be indicative of the possibilities for future prop conservation, especially as franchise films become a more regular part of our cinematic landscape.

While the measures and treatments for movie props and materials might differ from studio to studio or film to film, one thing is for certain. As long as Hollywood keeps making movies, we'll still have plenty of treasures to secure and protect. We cannot know which props from other, contemporary films will endure and which will fall away from the public imagination, but it's the least we can do to try and capture a little bit of the magic these objects gave us in the first place and make sure that magic lasts for as long as possible.

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