

# EIDR BEST PRACTICE: EARLY CINEMA & SILENT FILMS

*This document details the best practice for recording and maintaining early cinema and silent film data records.*

## 1 Introduction

Many of the identifying and distinguishing characteristics of contemporary audiovisual works are not available for works produced during the early days of the motion picture industry. Actualities, early “slice of life” recordings popular through c 1910, were often produced by a single impresario who acted as a camera operator, director, and producer. The distinct roles of writer, producer, and director were not clearly and consistently defined until the Hollywood system of regulated production was developed c. 1913–1918. This is further complicated by the fact that complete and accurate information regarding the creation of older audiovisual works may no longer be available, assuming it was ever recorded in the first place. Finally, early works may no longer exist in their entirety, so it may only be possible to describe the available clips or sequences with any certainty.

Silent films do not include recorded dialogue, though they may have been presented originally with live music and sound effects. In contemporary presentation, silent films are commonly presented with synchronous sound, but still lack audible speech. Even so, works from the later Silent Era traditionally had on-screen credits and intertitle cards to augment the narrative, so they were not entirely lacking linguistic components.

The following registration procedures and best practices were developed with these challenges in mind, so that different parties will be able to register and discover such works in the EIDR Registry easily and consistently.

## 2 Metadata Practices

The standard EIDR registration practices are amended as noted below to accommodate early cinema and silent films as well as contemporary works with similar issues.

### 2.1 Mode

Use “Visual” for early cinema and silent works produced without synchronous sound.

**NOTE:** Contemporary works that are recorded with diegetic sound (the sounds that occurred naturally at the time the visuals were recorded), such as a nature film with no added narration, may be recorded as “AudioVisual.”

## 2.2 Title (Resource Name)

Record the work’s original release title in its original language, if known, and set the Title Class to “release.” Otherwise, record the name by which the work is most commonly known, such as Edison’s “The Kiss” of 1896 or “The Zapruder Film” of 1963, and set the Title Class to “other.”

If a work is known by multiple names, provide the additional names as Alternate Titles (Alternate Resource Name) with a descriptive Title Class, including “regional” for foreign release titles, “AKA” (Also Known As) for nicknames, and “FKA” (Formerly Known As) for past names no longer in use.

If only part of a work survives, or the title of the original cannot be determined, provide a brief descriptive phrase to summarize the work’s content in place of the title and set the Title Class to “internal.”

## 2.3 Original Language

Early cinema and silent films lack spoken language, but the Original Language must still be provided. If credits, intertitles, or subtitles are present, use these to determine the correct language code. If the film is completely devoid of language, as with the early work of the Lumière brothers, use “zxx” to indicate “no linguistic content.” In either case, set the language Mode to “Visual.”

## 2.4 Release Date

Record the most accurate date for the work’s first public exhibition. If the work was not formally released according to the contemporary convention, use the date production was completed (for actualities, the date they were shot).

Use a full date, if known. Otherwise, provide the year. If even the year is not certain, record the best and earliest approximation for the release year and add “RD:circa;” to Registrant Extra to indicate that the release date is estimated.

## 2.5 Approximate Length

Provide the most accurate running time value possible given the information on hand at the time. If only a portion of the original work survives, and the original running time is not known, record the length of the longest extant sequence (which may include elements from multiple partially overlapping clips). Update the approximate length it in the future if more accurate information becomes available.

**NOTE:** Motion picture recording rates (frames per second) varied prior to the standardization of synchronous sound systems c. 1930. For hand-cranked cameras common to the early silent era, the speed could vary within a single shot. When

calculating the running time of such works, estimate the recording speed as accurately as possible to calculate the work's approximate length.

## 2.6 Credits

Early works, such as actualities, often do not include on-screen credits. (Or if they did, they may no longer be attached to the portions of the work that now survive.) Third party documents often represent the only resource that names the individuals and organizations responsible for a work's creation.

- **Director:** The work's principle creators or recorders (up to 2). If the individual was not credited as "director" (or the local language equivalent), then optionally provide the actual credit in the Registrant Extra field using the form "D:Function;" (if only one Director is listed) or "D#:Function;" where "#" is the Director credit's position in the EIDR record (1 or 2) and "Function" is the individual's job title or functional role.
  - For example, in *The British Film Catalogue* compiled by Denis Gifford, early works may have a "Ph" credit (for "Photographer") rather than a director credit. The identified individual could be listed in EIDR as the work's Director with an optional "D:Ph;" (or "D1:Ph;" if there is a second Director in the EIDR record) in the Registrant Extra to indicate the actual function.
- **Actor:** Any identifiable person or organized group who appears on camera, listed in order of decreasing prominence (up to 4).
- **Associated Org:**
  - **Producer:** The company(ies) that commissioned the creation of the work and/or took charge of its physical production. Prior to the introduction of film exchanges, a single company would generally act as producer and exhibitor, without an intermediate distributor.
  - **Distributor:** If the work pre-dates the introduction of "film rentals" (embodied in the contemporary concept of film distribution), list one or more of the potentially several film exchanges that sold the film during the period of its initial availability.
    - A collection that makes their copy(ies) of a work available for non-commercial viewing (including a digitized copy of a film) may also be listed as a "distributor." This will provide a contemporary point of reference for those hoping to view such works.
  - **Other:** A sponsoring or financing organization that was associated with the work during its initial availability but that was not directly responsible for the work's physical production, commercial distribution, or public exhibition.
    - An archive or library that only possesses descriptive metadata about a work, or that does not make their copy(ies) available for

public viewing, may be listed as an “other” Associated Org. This will provide a contemporary point of reference for those seeking additional information about such works.

## 2.7 Metadata Authority

Archives, libraries, and other collection curators should list themselves as a metadata authority (using their assigned EIDR Party ID) for the works in their collections that are no longer generally available from commercial entities.

## 2.8 Description

The EIDR Description is not used in automated de-duplication, but it is very useful for manual review and later discovery, particularly when the same work is held in multiple collections. In the case of early cinema works, particularly fragments of a work, the physical characteristics of the film are often important identifying factors, including film gauge; image orientation; aspect ratio; sprocket holes (if any) including their shape, number, and position; tinting or dyeing; film base; etc.

## 2.9 Referent Type

The contemporary concept of the “feature” film is based on running time rather than the work’s prominence within a program of multiple works. Thus, what may have been a feature film in the days of early cinema is now considered a short. For EIDR’s purposes, a “Movie” is a work of more than 40 minutes in total running time, while a “Short” is anything 40 minutes or less.

## 2.10 Alternate IDs

Include any commercial or non-commercial catalog IDs, reference numbers, etc. that may also be associated with the work. This includes public data aggregators, such as IMDb, archives, such as BFI, copyright registries, such as the Library of Congress, catalogs, such as Gifford numbers, library call numbers, etc.

## 2.11 Live Events

Actualities are unedited recordings of live events. Contemporary live events are generally those that are presented live (such as a sporting event), not just recorded live (such as a game show). However, the special nature of actualities may warrant recording the day the event took place separately from when the film of the event was released. In these cases, follow the separate practices for live events to record the event date.