

A Dendrological survey of Billy Wilder's 1960 film "The Apartment".  
To accompany the film installation "Moving Pictures", Peter Miller, 2005

Dendrology is the study of plants whose support systems, trunks and stems, are composed primarily of wood fibers. A dendrologist can look at the cross-section of a tree and, based on the spacing of the growth rings, recognize historical weather patterns. Knowing these periods of weather reveals where a tree grew, when it began growing, and when it was felled. Dendrologists are sort of like tree anthropologists.

This 35mm film print of Billy Wilder's 1960 film, "The Apartment", reminds me of a cross-section of a tree. A film that has been "plattered" (assembled to be projected as one object) like this begins at the core and moves outwards in rings until the end. The cellulose in this film was derived from plants. It has measurable qualities that make it unique, such as being black and white, mono and widescreen. It is nearly a mile long.

I am able to show this film here in this manner because it is being obliterated. It has vinegar syndrome (take a whiff). Vinegar Syndrome is a term used to describe a chemical reaction that takes place during the deterioration of cellulose triacetate film. The reaction is continuous and cannot be stopped or reversed. Worse yet, it is contagious; films with vinegar syndrome must be isolated or destroyed or else other nearby films can develop it.

A parallel could be drawn to Dutch elm disease, which has destroyed over 100 million American Elms in the northern United States since the 1930s. It is caused by the fungus *Ophiostoma ulmi*, which is carried by a beetle. It cannot be cured, only slowed and it's potential to infect neighboring elms sometimes necessitates destroying the infected. Some arborists are replanting the Buisman Elm, which is resistant to the fungus, but lacks the arched crown that made the American Elm so majestic. Of the films that were made during the first fifty of the cinema's 100 year history, over half have been irrevocably lost forever. American Elms grow to be over 100 feet tall.