On the History and Function of Film Archives

An Essay[1]

by

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Let us not start at the beginning, but with the replication of this beginning in the form of Peter Tscherkassky's remarkable film L'ARRIVÉE (1998). It "is composed of single pieces of 35mm film that have been edited during the copying process. Yet before any real image becomes visible we are shown blank film. Nothing. Or, better put, things which certainly should not show up on blank film: dirt, faults, scratches and marks that flit across the screen. The soundtrack in particular strengthens this impression. We hear a *composition automatique* – the unsettling 'music' which issues from every mechanical process – before any intentional note or image is introduced. This 'gramophone' plays a track which not only records the noise of the machine but presents it as something capable of art. L'ARRIVÉE works with material from *Mayerling*, a feature film shot in Vienna with Catherine Deneuve. One sees, fleetingly in black and white, the arrival of a train at a station. One sees, therefore, the replica of the Lumière film L'ARRIVÉE D'UN TRAIN Á LA CIOTAT." (Horwath 2005: 41)

Two pivotal themes converge in Tscherkassky's short film. Firstly, we find the idea of the *train journey*, which is closely linked to both the dynamics of movement and the frightening origins of cinematography itself. Secondly, and in no way less terrifying, it embodies the idea of the *fantastic* which filtered into the various genres of the fantastic film during the 1930s and 1940s. Both these aspects are connected to the archive, to preservation. The avant-garde, as shown by the film in question, discovered film history by following in the path of archives: it returned to the beginnings of film with the purpose of confronting the medium's origins and its tradition. And so Peter Tscherkassky's footage takes audiences back to the birthplace of film: a train station. Partly a place of arrival and partly a place of departure, it is an interface which enables him to evoke the subversive potential and quality of early cinema by using material found coincidentally. The material, but also its own materiality, intermingles with the images on screen, locating itself outside of the area it was intended for. Be it films, train stations or archives, this is where it ends, and this is where it begins – again.

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The History of Film Archives

The first film archives to appear in the early years of cinematography were mainly run by single individuals. And yet the wish to preserve material on a long-term basis goes back as far as the pre-cinema era. In 1894 W.K.L. Dickenson, who had coinvented the Kinetoskope, called for ways of preserving his "vitalized pictures." (Stephen Bottomore 2002: 86) In Europe in the early 20th century, attention also became increasingly focused on preserving the moving image. In Paris, for instance, the polish-born Boleslaw Matuszewski and his German colleague Hermann Häfker formulated farsighted ideas on the subject of film archiving. Both men are considered pioneers in this field and they persisted in drawing attention to the necessity of preserving film sources.

While Matuszewski, whose book *Une nouvelle source de l'histoire – création d'un dépôt cinématographie historique* came out as early as 1898, was more concerned with establishing film as a valuable historic source, Häfker's paper *Das Kino und die Gebildeten* (Cinema and its Scholars) from 1915 already formulated the possible tasks and difficulties facing future archives and depots. His clearly articulated strategies primarily dealt with concepts of preservation and were, when compared with the technical standards of the time, extremely advanced. With the onset of the First World War the physical protection of the material became, for obvious reasons, the primary concern of archives. Today, however, the condition of films from this period is extremely poor: after the war ended large collections of films and documents, especially news coverage of the conflict were destroyed.

In the years leading up to the end of the 1920s, numerous departments for audiovisual media were set up within existing, well-established institutions, while new, mainly state-run organisations focused on the medium of film. The 1930s saw film archives established in all typical film-producing countries and it was these which became the first organisations to join the umbrella organisation for film archives, the Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film (FIAF) which still exists today. At its launch in 1938, FIAF consisted of only four members. Today it includes over 120 affiliates from more than 60 countries. In the period before the Second World War the tendency amongst archives was towards enlarging collections and continuing where private collectors had left off, although the artefacts were mostly acquired without any specific selection procedure.

Despite having to work within the limits of an excessively canonical approach to film heritage and historiography, film archives turned their attention in the years between the two world wars to rescuing (feature) films. And although the cross border enlargement of collections was practically impossible during the war years, the period after 1945 witnessed a renewed expansion of archive structures and a revitalisation of FIAF. Thanks to the endeavours of this institution in particular the cultural exchange of film was once again set in motion. Indeed, networking between archives, offering help and advice, organising congresses and relevant courses and publishing literature continue to form the central functions of the federation.

In the 1960s a new generation of archivists appeared armed with publications who stressed for the first time the vital link between archives and historiography. It is astonishing, however, that it was frequently these individuals who vehemently defended the classic approach to archival work and protected their holdings at any cost – even if that meant making it practically impossible for the (academic) public to access them. The then nascent discussions on the difficulties between serving a public purpose *and* preserving archive holdings remain a key feature in the daily work of film archives today. One positive side effect of this conflict was that detailed investigation into the problems of preservation was carried out at this time. Over and above the significant changes that occurred towards the end of the decade and which will be covered later on in detail, the 1970s were a time which succeeded in finding a balance between the still very varied responsibilities of archives. This did not prevent them, however, from developing strong areas of specialisation.

The Particularities of Audiovisual Collections

Audiovisual media distinguish themselves through "their ability to transfer natural and physical processes onto [filmic] material. Indeed, AV media are not only capable of conveying verbal information (e.g. spoken language) but also – and this is their unique ability – they can capture and relay non-verbal information in an entirely mechanical way." (Rainer Hubert 1993: 65) Thus if the qualities of film material are many and varied, then so are the collections held in the institutions which handle them. They encompass film in all its manifestations: edited and unedited material, published and unpublished sources, posters and film programmes (and of course all the digitised variants). The collection of journals, magazines and relevant publications and the integration of inherited estates has marked a change in archive conduct and become a vital component in building up existing holdings. And yet if material is to be made accessible the varied and frequently problematic nature of film material makes it necessary to define standards for this process. These standards will clearly differ, however, depending on the organisation of the institution, the expertise of its employees and the condition of the material itself.

There are nevertheless clear areas which apply to all archives. In sharp contrast to books, for example, any reduction of film material more or less automatically impairs the information it communicates. In other words, even small amounts of damage to film material have an adverse effect on its totality. Besides the danger of material becoming obsolete, i.e. the fact that machines needed for exhibition purposes are seldom produced today, the material itself poses a threat which must not be underestimated. Storage media on the whole have an increasingly shorter lifespan: advances in this area of technology are geared more towards boosting data capacity rather than data protection in terms of permanent preservation. Without a doubt therefore it is the holdings of an archive which determine its key functions and on which its necessary autonomy rests.

To conclude, the authority of independent AV archives is found in the fact that they fulfil a particular function that no other organisation can. It is a function that springs from the structural quirks of audiovisual media themselves: the ability to reflect the particularities of the medium, or rather methods of transferring information onto it, the enormous vulnerability of the medium, and finally, the juxtaposition of published and unpublished material such as oeuvres and documentary records.

Archive Policy

The different areas of responsibility covered by film archives can be summarised in the following way: collecting, restoring, preserving, expanding, making accessible, and evaluating. These steps, described here in their logical order, illustrate very clearly both the lifecycle of a film in an archive and the ideal situation national archives strive for. "[T]he appreciation of the archival responsibilities of a national archive is essential to acquiring, safeguarding, preserving and making available national film production." (Friedrich P. Kahlenberg 1978: 146).

The actual finding of material can happen in various ways. Film archives acquired their first substantial collections from private holdings and yet, despite active collecting during this period, very little material from the early cinema era exists today. It is therefore extremely important that modern archives have an active policy of acquisition and incorporate newer and increasingly popular formats such as video or DVD. This kind of permanent expansion demands that available material is selected objectively and carefully, without discriminating between feature and documentary films. The question remains, however, whether the "compulsory archiving" of national productions would be of benefit in the long run or if it would needlessly tie up resources. Closely linked to this is the question of TV productions, which, on account of their material character, would certainly be suitable for archiving. Questions like these touch on the sensitive area which, over and above general "commitment to the archive" (Jacques Derrida 1997: 135), is termed *archive policy*. "Every archivist obeys a certain 'archive policy': the decision whether a document should be seen as suitable for archiving is governed by a clear principle of selection. Both inclusive and exclusive, this principle does not simply decide whether or not material will be accepted into the archive, but also on its subsequent exclusion from the archive, so-called 'cassation'." (Uwe Wirth).

Preservation and Presentation

Restoration, or rather the process of correcting individual defects, is often paraphrased in film archives with the term *preservation*. "[P]reservation incorporates all the measures which in the long run guarantee a maximum of safeguarding, protection of and access to film." (Wolfgang Klaue 1990: 88) Preservation is seen by many archivists as one of their most important areas of work, a fact that can be explained by the nature of film material itself which presents both a difficult challenge and an artefact worthy of safeguarding. Film is an

exceedingly precarious, even dangerous medium, as the recently published collection of essays on the history of nitrate film – the appropriately titled *This Film is Dangerous* – identified. The explanation for this does not lie in the content of film but in its physical and chemical substance.

Until the mid 1950s films were shot using so-called nitro-celluloid – a durable yet highly problematic material. Over time, age and storage-related shrinkage and internal deterioration have impaired the film reels. Probably the most well-known problem with nitrate is its flammability. Spontaneous combustion of nitrate films already threatened by deterioration can occur at temperatures little over 40 degrees Celsius.

Calls for an alternative to nitrate film were voiced soon after the first extensive fire in a cinema in Paris in 1897, in which a lot of material was lost.

The earliest steps in this direction were taken in 1902 and, according to an observation in the *New York Evening Times* from 15 June 1909, a more secure variation, the celluloid acetate film, was by that time already available. Evidence that this new and less flammable film material was actually used can only be found, however, in the years 1912 (by the cinema pioneer George Eastman) and 1914 (in several Pathé weekly news reels). It was only in the years between the wars that acetate-celluloid film was regularly used, but any attempts to establish it as a general substitute for nitrate were stalled by the outbreak of the Second World War. After the conflict, regulations governing the use of both acetate film and its superior alternatives, triacetate film and polyester film or 'safety film', were put in place. The Federal Republic of Germany implemented these regulations in 1957, Austria in 1966.

Film archives are primarily faced with two kinds of damage when restoring a film: damage to the material itself which has occurred either during the production process or as a result of use, and damage caused by inappropriate storage. Preservation therefore goes hand-in-hand with conservation, in other words with the safekeeping and frequent inspection of existing holdings. Correct storage of film material demands an environment which can guarantee a certain temperature and humidity. In terms of climate the ideal film depot adheres to two principles: it must be *cool* in order to slow down the chemical processes occurring within the material, and it must be *dry* to prevent moisture from affecting the layer of gelatine that covers the material or from joining forces with heat and encouraging harmful bacteria.

Archiving restored material does not simply refer to proper safekeeping, but to shaping and storing an entire secured package. The scholarly use of holdings has helped to give outsiders an overview of the most significant film material held in collections, something which simple cataloguing is only partially able to achieve. Long-term investment in historical material and documents, contributions to national and international projects, the integration of a specialist library and a department for academic affairs, and efficient documenting of

films are all essential to the process of making material accessible. This last point "refers to the systematic gathering of material on film productions without differentiating between genre or origin. This means full-length feature films are equal to the most recent edition of a still-surviving weekly news reel, just as an official documentary is equal to the promotional film of a big business." (Friedrich P. Kahlenberg 1978: 147)

In the areas of making accessible and evaluating material the film archive is clearly separate to classic cinematheques in that, "alongside its immediate archival responsibilities, it is in the position to exhibit its holdings [...] Cinematheques depend constantly on the output of efficient international film archives." (Friedrich P. Kahlenberg 1978: 146) For this reason cinematheques concentrate more on attracting audiences with quantity and, as a rule, steer clear of thematic focuses. When exhibiting archive-specific material one has to take into account the numerous features of programming which themselves affect the form the final performance will take. Projecting the film onto the screen does not just bring the medium to life, but, if accompanied by such additional features as introductions and other forms of commentary, it can (re)animate film history and open the door for challenging discussions. Without hindering cross-media interaction, this ultimately leads to a clearer profile for the area of film. Commenting on films as part of a performance is especially necessary if the films have been deemed impossible to programme by cinematheques: film fragments, restored treasures from archive holdings or even fragile material. These kinds of performance also encourage traditional exhibition practices, for example accompanying silent films with live music.

Publications are a further instrument for reaching the wider public. The 1960s were one of the first periods to step up the production of publications, mainly filmographies particular to a specific country, catalogues, reference books and directories. From the 1990s onwards the focus turned to literature on holdings which were connected to research carried out by the archives. Over and above their function in making collections accessible and enlightening readers on the basic aesthetics and history of film, the new guidelines on publications attempt to encourage a broad and detailed understanding of the history of cinema and give a more complete picture of national film history. Publications form support systems for archives; they also help boost an archive's standing. Indeed, the position an archivist holds – sandwiched between the material and the user – is often advantageous. The demands of the user can be better served if the archivist is well-researched. This method of supporting research goes hand-in-hand with the work of academic institutions and only by combining the efforts of the two can a productive examination of audiovisual media be ensured.

The Brighton Effect

The idea of making material available whenever possible and the concept of offering a *living archive* is, unfortunately, anything other than straightforward. The situation became somewhat easier after 1978 through that year's FIAF congress which was held in Brighton.

Its theme was feature films from 1900 to 1906, and it is often seen as a turning point in film studies. The focus on early cinema enabled a young generation of film scholars – including many of the big names in film studies today such as Tom Gunning, David Francis and André Gaudreault – to constructively criticise classic film history as presented by the likes of George Sadoul or Friedrich von Zglinicki. This led – and has continued to lead – archivists to reconsider attempts at dividing film history into periods, and to discuss the social and cultural context surrounding the production and reception of films. Even more revolutionary was their attempt at linking the development of cinematography and the institutionalisation of cinema with the ideas of modernity. "Increasing urbanism, mass audiences and mass production, the rise of commercial popular entertainment, the proliferation of visual culture, new claims of gender and racial equality, new technologies of communication and transportation, new models of perception and consciousness, increased secularisation and the influence of science – all these broad cultural issues could be focused through the lens of early cinema." (Tom Gunning 2003: 25)

These ideas brought about a return to actual source material, which triggered essential changes in basic approaches to research: the integration of film archives was necessary, and it was also desired. The fact that this coincided with the rise of a new generation within the archives who were interested in informing and motivating members of the public, also helped the process on its way.

Archival work always means social interaction. Film archives exist to serve memories and to build on those memories for and in the future. By preserving and animating collections, archives are not only faced with fresh and existing challenges, but become the "cradle of a new film culture" (Friedrich P. Kahlenberg 1978: 143). They are faced with the challenging task of being "guardians of material for future generations and yet ensuring today's users are served in the best possible way. For if contemporary scholars do not utilize documents and artefacts we risk losing knowledge bound to a specific time, while interest for certain areas will wane, and those who come after us will be unable to recognise important issues." (Sabine Lenk 1998: 165)

(Self)reflection: Narration and Temporality

Two further basic archival principles should be touched on which play a central role in the tasks but also in the *image* of film archives: narration and temporality. Both these principles see the archive as a kind of refuge for source material. They also, to reverse the argument, raise the question of how film itself positions the archive; how institutions, their material and their employees are presented. The previously mentioned animation of material by archives can be seen as a cyclical process which, in their search for themes, is closely bound to a second and similar cycle. Roughly divided into two groups we have, on the one hand, films which can be attributed with a *formal* narrative strategy, and, on the other, those which consciously work with a *content-oriented* narrative strategy. As with (almost) all typologies,

these outlines are not set in stone but, for instance when focusing on *formal* attributes, it is the problematic material condition of film and cinema to which attention is turned. So, for example, Gustav Deutsch's film TRADITION IST (Tradition Is) from 1999 fuses the various kinds of deterioration threatening film. On a content level, it shows a fire, but this is also matched in the coating of the material itself which has been damaged by deterioration. Bill Morrison's DECASIA from 2002 takes things a step further. By actually celebrating the deterioration (Simmel 1996) of film fragments he draws our attention to their transience and decomposition, but also to how the medium has gained the ability to relate information both *with* and *about* the material precisely through the state it finds itself in. The title of this hypnotic film indicates the line Morrison is following: *Decasia* is created by taking the elements from the words 'decay', 'fantasy' and the name given to ancient paradise, 'arcadia'. This interplay between what has been lost and what we have regained produces a kind of irreversible film narrative, and draws discord from the material.

Morrison's choice of title leads us to the second principle of narrative strategy. Few examples for this could be more fitting than *Possession* (2002), based on the novel of the same name by Antonia Byatt and centred on a revolutionary discovery found by competing literary scholars in the biography of a fictive Victorian poet. Like Suzanne Keen's *Romances of the Archives in Contemporary British Fiction* so cleverly presents, any film action taking place within an *archive* is characterised by a number of reoccurring elements. Besides the importance of the material to the central puzzle (which frequently determines the plot), these include romantic escapades of the protagonists and the poor working conditions of the archivists and academics. Evoking the atmosphere of the institution and detective style research are also common features of this kind of film. The institution itself frequently functions as springboard for some kind of innovation, it also gradually replaces the outside world. Taken a few steps further this can be interpreted as the archive replacing life itself. A good example of this can be found in David Cronenberg's media-reflective feature film VIDEODROME (1983) in which the entirely televised character of Dr. Brian O'Blivion – nomen est omen – is preserved solely in the form of answers and statements pre-saved onto video cassettes. Despite his physical change and displacement, the deceased Dr. O'Blivion guarantees the archive's survival in the transferral of life to medium.

The immortality promised by film, the attempts on the part of film archives to delay deterioration, and their attempt to remain efficient regardless of temporal conditions and limitations brings us to the second principle: the dimension of temporality. Archives which, in their philosophical approach to material, see a "pledge" to the future, are permanently faced with the conflict between film history and time which has been seized by the medium of film. In his essay *Die versiegelt Zeit* (Sealed Time), the director Alexander Tarkovski discusses this clear challenge to the future of all archives, and with this conclusion we really do arrive at the beginning, at the encore of the encore. "Even today we are unable to forget the ingenious "The Arrival of a Train", a film that was shown last century and which set the ball rolling. This well-known film by Auguste Lumière was simply shot because the film camera, film reels and

projection apparatus had just been invented. The film, which lasts little over half a minute, captures part of a platform bathed in sunlight on which ladies and gentlemen pace, and finally, from the depths of the frame, a train approaches the camera. The closer the train came, the greater the panic in the cinema. Some audience members even jumped up from their seats and ran out of the auditorium. This moment marked the birth of the cinema. And it wasn't just a question of technology or a new way of representing the world. No, it was the beginning of a new aesthetic principle. For the first time in the history of art and culture we had found a way of *capturing time* and reproducing it at liberty, a way of returning back to a moment as and when desired. A matrix of *real* time. Captured time could, from that moment on, be stored for a lengthy period (theoretically even forever) in metal tins. (Andrej Tarkowskij 1985: 68)

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