

Rossella Catanese

## How to Benefit from Academics?

*A Roundtable with Film Archives*

The following dialogue is the result of a roundtable conducted via Zoom about the relation between the research project *ViCTOR-E* (*Visual Culture of Trauma, Obliteration and Reconstruction in Post-WWII Europe*), here represented by Rossella Catanese (University of Udine), Lucie Česálková (Academy of Sciences in Prague), and Paolo Villa (University of Udine), and the partner film archives, represented by Marion Boulestreau (Ciné-Archives, France), Matěj Strnad (Národní Filmový Archiv Prague, Czech Republic), Elena Testa (Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa, Italy), Julia Welter (Deutsches Filminstitut & Film-museum) with the purpose of deepening the issues about academic research and cinema-theques. As the *ViCTOR-E* project focused primarily on non-fiction cinema as an agent of post-war reconstruction of the public space, the discussion deals primarily with this type of archive collections and the status and possibilities of their valorisation.

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**Rossella Catanese:** *How would you describe the role of your institution in preserving, gate-keeping, and providing access to non-fiction cinema?*

**Marion Boulestreau:** I am working at Cinéarchives, which is a very small non-profit association located in Paris and our role is to preserve and promote the film archive of the French Communist Party and the Labour movement in France. The French Communist Party was one of the biggest Communist parties of Western Europe, alongside with the Italian party, but in France it was very powerful even in the 1930s. Since this period until today, the Party produced a huge number of films, so the scope of this collection is very broad. It's mainly non-fiction, but there are a few fiction films as well. It's a bit hard to say how many films there are because you can't really quantify all the recent material, but we used to say that we have about 1500 films. For many years now, we've been digitising the collection, and today, about 800 films are available online for free on our website (<https://>

www.cinearchives.org/). The association was created in 1998 and is pursuing the action that was once launched within the Communist Party, despite now we are a fully independent association. We are a very small team, just two or three people. Our daily job is mainly to document the films, but we also sell the materials to documentary filmmakers, which is one of the most important funding sources for our archive. As this is so important activity for us, we don't have enough time to develop collaborations with universities or scholars. But occasionally, we go to universities and introduce Ciné-Archives and our work to history and cinema students.

**Matěj Strnad:** We are a national film archive, Národní Filmový Archiv, of the Czech Republic, which means we are a rather large institution with a large collection, funded nationally through the Ministry of Culture. As a long standing FIAF member, we focus mainly on film preservation, but selling of footage is an important part of our activities as well, because two thirds of our budget come from licensing. All cinema production after 1945 in the former Czechoslovakia was nationalised and this condition existed up until 1992 — that is why NFA as a national institution administers the production rights of Czechoslovak cinema. It is a quite exceptional situation for a film archive to have such a broad and general access to rights. This, in theory, could make things very easy for us in terms of providing access, and valorisation of the collection, but at the same time, we are sort of sitting on two chairs because the reason why we have been granted these production rights for the Czechoslovak cinema is so that we can make up these two thirds of our budget from licensing. On a more general level, there is a certain dynamic between our incentive to make the collection accessible and the need to fund the preservation budget through licensing and commercial distribution. When it comes to non-fiction films, it's very difficult to say the numbers, but our database listings alone give me about 30,000 documentaries and newsreels, so the collection is large. It mainly consists of Czech and Czechoslovak cinema, but we take care also of a huge set of international films, both non-fiction and fiction. There are about 130 or 140 people working in the archive, including the library, the cinema, and all the distribution activities, so we would belong among the larger institutions.

**Julia Welter:** The Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum is the oldest film institution in Germany. It was founded as early as 1949 and then in 2006 it merged with the collections of the German Film Museum — and we're both in the same building anyway. And, unlike what Matěj said, we're not a national film archive because in Germany, due to the federal states, there are several archives that share the responsibilities of what are the tasks of national archives in other countries. We don't have only a film archive, but also a cinema and a museum, where we promote and teach about film history. Our film archive is medium-sized, we have around 30,000 film copies, 20,000 film works. It covers pretty much everything from feature films, short films, documentaries as well as amateur and experimental films, we also have a sizeable collection of animated films, and specifically focus on advertising and industrial films. I'd say the DFF has a special role in Europe in that, as early as 2006, we started coordinating European funded projects that were particularly concerned with giving access to either information on nonfiction film collections of European film archives or giving access to those films. Most notably, Film Archives Online was created back in 2006; as a joint catalogue of 18 film archives, where they gave access to cat-

alogue information, particularly on non-fiction films that they held in their collections. We started the European Film Gateway, where we also give access to, among other things, digitised non-fiction films from about 40 plus partner archives — lots of newsreels but also other documentary short formats. We're also very much into giving access and promoting these formats online.

**Elena Testa:** Archivio Nazionale Cinema Impresa was created in 2006 in Ivrea, near Turin, as a branch department of Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia foundation — the Italian National Film Archive of Rome. ANCI's mission is the identification, cataloguing, storage, preservation and valorization of industrial and promotional films made by some important Italian companies, such as Borsalino, Fiat, Edison, National Railways, Olivetti and others. Currently, the Archive holdings consist of 80.000 films on manufacturing, business organization, construction, official events, recreational, social and well-being activities for workers and their families. The film collection held in ANCI is a unique material of its kind. On one hand, the rediscovery of industrial films has made it possible to enhance production areas of Italian cinema that had long been neglected, completing the filmography of important filmmakers such as Bernardo Bertolucci, Franco Zeffirelli, Alessandro Blasetti, Luca Comerio, Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, Dino Risi, Valentino Orsini, Ermanno Olmi, and others. On the other hand, this rediscovery reveals works whose artistic value may be relative, but which are becoming increasingly important as historical sources and as support for teaching. Of course, the documentary value of the films depends largely on the historians who question them, on the quality of their questions, on the depth of their interpretative hypotheses and on the originality of their intellectual project: however, fostering the encounter between films and scholars, between film source and research is one of the most important missions of this archive. From this encounter an ever more suggestive and effective story of the industrial twentieth century can be told. In recent years, ANCI has opened up to little-known film genres such as home movies, amateur film, religious and militant cinema that bear witness to different aspects of the evolution of an entire community and tell the story of the twentieth century from different points of view.

**R. C.:** *May you explain the collaboration with the ViCTOR-E project on an online exhibition about post-war non-fiction cinema? And can you identify barriers and assess the benefits of cooperation between film archives and research institutes (universities, academic institutes, etc.)?*

**E. T.:** ANCI collaborated with ViCTOR-E project by making available films produced by companies and documentaries that recounted the transformations of those years in Italy. The researchers worked both in the archive and online through YouTube channels that we manage: *Cinemaimpresatv*, *Mi ricordo* and *Documentalia*. The main difficulty was due to the time needed to prepare and to digitize the masters. Our archive is very young and not all the material has been processed.

**M. B.:** I was very happy we could join ViCTOR-E project since it's the first time for us that we're participating in this kind of collaboration. I particularly appreciate the work with researchers and the international dimension of the project. We are such a small team that is often overwhelmed by all the daily amount of work, so it's very hard for us to launch

big projects or to give access to our films on a European level, especially because we lack international visibility. Also, our website is in French, and we've been waiting to translate it for years, but we're still lacking budget and time, so we just keep it as it is... Maybe this could be the first step to gain a bit of a recognition from other institutions. For the question of the barriers between film archives and research institutes, I think in France at least, film is still regarded as a source that's not to be trusted by many scholars, maybe not by the younger generation, but still, it is by many historians. Cinema has been existing for 120 years and it is still not seen as trustworthy as books and written material.

**M. S.:** We are always glad for an opportunity to address the less visible parts of the collection, or the parts of the collection which maybe haven't yet been fully processed and digitised, so any incentive in this respect helps us to shift our attention towards non-fiction films. We find it very useful because, since we are such a large institution, we tend to focus primarily on fiction film and big digital restoration projects. If there is palpable interest, both national and international, in non-fiction film, it helps to advocate for putting more resources that way. As an institution, we can benefit from the research and from these new perspectives of understanding our collections. We probably agree that this is something we all want, but in our case, for example, we are quite lagging in terms of our cataloguing systems and ways how we process and describe our film collection. There's great potential, and as we're working on a new cataloguing system, I hope in the future there would be better ways to facilitate this kind of mutual exchange.

**Lucie Česálková:** In this respect, I would like to follow up on Matěj and mention that the very concrete result of the cooperation between the ViCTOR-E project and the NFA will be the incorporation into the NFA catalogue of keywords created by the project researchers. It will not be a replacement of the original metadata description, but an extension with the new set of keywords. I think that exchanging knowledge on how to conceptualize films and how to apply these conceptualizations in cataloguing can be one of the important ways of cooperation between film archives and academics in the future.

**J. W.:** I think it's true for DFF as well. For all the reasons that were mentioned before, we appreciate it being a partner in this project. We've also been able to digitise thanks to the lab La Camera Ottica (at the Gorizia branch of the University of Udine), around 30 titles from our collection that wouldn't otherwise have been digitised, at least not at this point, I suppose, which is always obviously a great thing. Maybe I could say a few words about my role as the archives' contact in this project, and I would support what Marion and Matěj have said — that, in general, archives were very open to collaborate with researchers, I guess, because they do have an interest in seeing their collections evaluated and reused in context that add a new layer to catalogue information that they have in the archive. We have used two approaches: on the one hand, we contacted archives for the film clips of the exhibition, which is, I guess, a very day-to-day and straightforward request for an archive. We were lucky that rights were not a major obstacle in our project. I honestly had expected this to be more difficult, but luckily the archives were very collaborative, some of them even went to the length to clear the rights for us. On the other hand, we also asked them to make available larger parts of their collections on the European Film Gateway, so in contrast to the clips we're using in our online exhibition, on EFG we have the higher number of complete films that are connected to the research topic (right now there

are 650 titles connected to *ViCTOR-E*). The researchers investigated all those films and added keywords developed within the project which also really improved their findability on the European Film Gateway but also in archives own catalogues. Also, the archives saw the benefit and having these extra keywords or, in some cases, even content descriptions written by researchers.

**R. C.:** *So, the visibility of the archives and the international network that was created was beneficial. Audiovisual heritage is now receiving attention from policymakers. What impact would you expect from the governmental institutions at the local, national, and international levels about your archive's content and mission?*

**M. B.:** I would be very curious to know about the situation in the other European countries because we've been lucky in France to benefit from a very voluntary public action for decades, regarding culture and cinema. For instance, the CNC, the National Centre for Cinema has been, and still is, a very important protagonist for many years in the preservation of cinema — and it preserves lots of our own collections. In the past few years, however, we see a shift: there is both a decrease of public funding in France and also among the projects that they still support they are growing more and more interested in other stuff — i.e. virtual reality, which is far from what we do. Thus, we are rather worried now because we are not expecting much from national or local policymakers. It's been five years now since we don't have any more public funding, and we remain dependent on footage selling only. For the European level, projects are way too complicated for a small structure like we are. Our way can be joining bigger projects launched by other people.

**M. S.:** I'm not sure that the audiovisual heritage is receiving attention from policymakers, or that it's sufficient. We are very much dependent on the Ministry of Culture, which means that there is obviously institutional support, but this kind of reliance makes you very dependent on outcomes of elections, approaches that your local policy bodies take towards inflation, towards supporting public heritage institutions, etc. However, I would rather like to stress the role of the ACE, the European Association of European Cinema-theques, that is instrumental, as you all know, in the European Film Gateway project. It is very important for European archives to have a common platform, but also an interlocutor as a means of representing themselves towards not only European public, but also to the European policymakers. There I see still a great potential for improvement in terms of the European administration and its relation to film archives. How EU understands the importance of audiovisual heritage, the importance of film heritage institutions in this respect and how it finds the way to support them is crucial, because usually when there's anything that relates to European film, it's usually new productions. There is very little concern taken for film heritage institutions. Things are improving slowly, step by step, and this is why it is so important to highlight these projects and these collaborations on a European level and show that there is a great potential in further supporting and strengthening relations between archives and academic institution. Thanks to this the Commission and other parts of the European administration could take film archives maybe even more seriously than they do now.

**J. W.:** Yes, first I would like to second everything that Matěj has said about the situation on the EU level and stress that the EU is not usually funding digitisation. In this respect,

this project was an exception, where we were able to have a small budget to do digitisation, but they never do it on a larger scale. We had another exception in years 2012 to 2014 with the *EFG 1914* project, where 21 archives digitised meaningful collections related to the First World War, but this was the only project we had on the EU level that actually funded larger scale digitisation and after that digitisation was pushed back on national level where it's handled very differently. For example, in Germany we have no mass digitisation at all, we have a national digitisation funding program that is very much focused on fiction feature films, or I should say fiction films in general, and then also very much geared towards presentation in the cinema. As a result, literally everything that's digitised in this project is aimed for screenings in cinemas so there's nothing in there that allows us to publish those films online. At the same time, even within this project we can't speak about huge number of films. I think it enables to digitize around 300 titles per year throughout all German film institutions, so we're talking about, say 40 titles for the DFF, for example. More recently, we have really been trying to push the agenda more so that we're able to include more documentary films in this digitisation funding pool that we have.

**E. T.:** In Italy, in the last few years there has been and there is a real commitment on the part of institutions: local, and national, which is giving a great boost. This drive towards digitisation, which has been going on since the 1990s, is changing the way we see and consult archives. However, a too rapid transformation can generate problems. We must be careful and not forget that preservation is not the same as digitisation.

**R. C.:** *As institutions devoted to audiovisual heritage and memory, what do you think of your role in the future? What are your ideas about the new chances offered by digital access?*

**M. B.:** Well, in this regard I don't think much has changed for 15 years now that we have been digitising; even a very small structure like us has been able to digitise a very huge amount of films and, of course, the digital offers easier distribution of films, it also helps that it doesn't deteriorate too much the physical elements, because you prevent them from circulating too much. Of course, the digital helps us also make the films available on an international level. But then, well, I don't know what will happen. I just hope small independent institutions or film archives like ours will be able to maintain their activities in years to come. This is, I think a threat for us and a challenge to be able to carry on with this activity without being swallowed by national institutions, because, for instance, when in 1998 when Ciné-Archives was created at first, the idea had been to give this collection to INA, the National TV archive in France, and then a political decision was made within the Communist Party to try and maintain an independent structure. I just hope we can still continue in this way.

**M. S.:** I feel slightly bad for talking about these things after Marion because it's true that right now I'm representing this one national institution. While at NFA, we sometimes think about new agenda in the realm of really a broader understanding of audiovisual heritage, such as computer games, for example, and we, at the same time, ask ourselves, should it really be us again absorbing this? Is this centralization what's really needed? Shouldn't there be more institutions dealing with audiovisual heritage, for example? So, I perfectly understand the benefits of greater diversity of institutions, small and large, striving for not only preservation, but also research and valorisation because then this kind of

diversity also very much helps when it's not governed by one dominant institution. We are the national and the central institution so far, but we don't want to colonise the whole field. The other part of the question, however, also ties obviously two things that sometimes get conflated, namely the idea of access and availability and curation. And I think the obviously great deal of interest in the future would be in ways, how to make our collections accessible and available, but at the same time, work hard on curation and on helping people navigate, search, understand and learn from them, to publish it in an appropriate way and not just put more content online. We don't want to think of our audiovisual heritage only as content, but at the same time we don't want to be putting any barriers towards access. In our case, it's easier at this moment to make the actual films and digitised clips and videos accessible than the actual cataloguing information. So internally, for us, this is the biggest challenge. In that respect we are really lagging some like 10 or 15 years, because most of the major film heritage institutions already have their collection catalogues available and we don't. I'm active within FIAF's Programming and Access to Collections Commission so this is very much on our agenda and we are trying to monitor this. Archives invest a lot of time and energy into making individual videos available on either their channels or some VoDs etc., which is important for projects like this, a curated exhibition connected with EFG, but at the same time, we should be able to find the energy and time to work on making collection catalogues available and searchable for everyone.

**E. T.:** Our case is particular, because ANCI was opened in 2006, so we were born at a time when digital issues were already taking place and we structured our institution in this direction. For us, the climate control rooms for preservation, the database, the laboratory, and the online channels are working tools that move in a coordinated way. The heterogeneity of our films speaks to such a wide and diverse audience that the only way is digital access. This was clear to us from the beginning, and we have been rewarded, since now in Italy ANCI's "non-theatrical" historical materials are explored by historians, students, and production companies.

**J. W.:** I think there's also sometimes a disconnect between public expectation and that what an archive really can provide. Particularly in the beginning of the whole digitisation efforts, funding bodies were very keen on archives making as much content available online as possible, which then in the early days of Europeana and EFG, in fact, lead to huge collections that are online, but many of them with poor metadata. So, I totally agree also with what Matěj said. That it is really important for archives in the future to make sure they're not just publishing everything which then cannot be discovered properly because it lacks the appropriate catalogue information. Going to the question of new chances offered by digital access, particularly for non-fiction films, it has been answered, by Elena and Marion; it offers a much better exposure of underrepresented formats such as short non-fiction materials and it also allows us to promote this content as a historical source even to be evaluated and be done research on, like we did in the *ViCTOR-E* project. Ideal way is to integrate this content more into the educational context, which is also an important achievement of this project, as the creation of toolkit of E-learning activities allows non-fiction films to be watched and discussed in the classroom. I think that's a huge benefit of having these materials available in digital form but also increasingly online and it really enlarges the space where we used to promote film. That said, I'd like to remind us

that only 3% to 5% of all content that is available on Europeana is moving image content, so we're very much lagging behind the digitization of other material. It is for obvious reasons, of course, but still I think it's worth pointing out that, despite so much progress that has been made, and continues to be made, it's still such an effort to bring these materials online. That's where I see the biggest chance — the accessibility and promotion of under-represented formats.

**Paolo Villa:** You actually touched on many topics that have emerged in our discussions during our project meetings, like the curatorship, the availability, providing the material, but also providing it in a way that the content can be properly contextualised and easily accessible to the viewer. There are also other important issues that we, as researchers, don't take too much in consideration, like all the world of commercial licensing that is so important for the archives to keep on going with their work. Moreover, the constellation of smaller archives, that Marion was mentioning, and them being in danger of being swallowed up by the biggest institutions. I also want to stress the idea that the audiovisual heritage is a broader context than simply "film", and here I agree with Matěj that we are dealing specifically with "cinema heritage". In our project we tried to give the chance to these smaller institutions to gain visibility and to give a wider spectrum of the variety of their archival panorama, so it was important for us to have a point, a moment in the project, where we give voice to the archives, so thank you very much to all of you.

**M. S.:** Actually, I was about to say that it doesn't happen so often that the researchers by the end of the project come and are interested in archive's experience with their project. We, as film archives, are naturally interested in your user experience with our institution, but oftentimes it's not as easy as things should be. It is also great to see the interest you have in what we as the archives think, and what we need, etc. I haven't been so intensely involved with the project, but I was lucky enough to be at the launching meeting in Frankfurt and I'm happy to see this and to have witnessed that close connection between the research and archival part, researchers and archivists; that is very beneficial.

**R. C.:** With regard to the plurality of archives that we involved, I am thinking about the case of Home Movies in Italy, which is a very small institution, very similar to Ciné-Archives. This visibility is also part of an idea of pluralism, that we have tried to include within our project into many layers: thematic, political, and even institutional. I think that this roundtable was its final point.