Archiving for an Unknown Future: The State Film Documentation of the GDR (SFD)

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Store, classify, contextualise objects, records and present them.
Consider that these objects change their meaning over time.
Collect without knowing what will be important.
Capture the fleeting moments, the daily life.
Archival hegemony versus democracy.
Artefact and atmosphere versus data.
Access versus storing for the future.
The individual versus the universal.
Personal logging versus curation.

This list reflects only a tiny sample of the competing concerns most archivists face on a daily basis. It is even more troubled the deeper one deals with contested sovereignties. The *State Film Documentation* of the GDR (SFD) offers a unique entry point to re-thinking of archive in these contested environments.

Category: The pre-hoc ‘State’—memories born in the archive rather than retired to it

I will mainly focus on a collection of films made between 1972 and 1985 by the *Staatliche Filmdokumentation* (SFD)—the *State Film Documentation* unit—which survived as part of the collection of the *Staatliches Filmarchiv der DDR* (SFA), the former national film archive of the GDR. This corpus is commonly grouped into three main parts according to their time of production and content: the so-called ‘general documentation’ (1972–1977), films with a focus on Berlin (1978–1980), and films about the ‘socialist lifestyle’ (1981–1985). As I will show these film documents form a strange genre: although they can be considered filmic works in their own right, in many cases they were never meant to be screened in cinemas to a contemporary audience. Rather they were intended for future generations of GDR citizens only, or as stock footage to be kept within libraries for future research by historians and teachers. This is known as ‘pre-hoc’ archiving; that is, being conjured up *in* the archive rather than choosing an object / information and cataloguing it to the archive. The footage was also intended to be used by filmmakers who wished to make future films with at the time of collecting / recording with unknown purpose or at least no clear purpose. This unique collection not only contained audiovisual material but ultimately, information

about a specific time and place and its people, initiated and guided by the idea that one should collect the ‘typical’ sense of everyday life, but to do so in order to capture the ‘extraordinary’ as well.¹ While introducing the SDF as one main example for collecting historical images for later use, I will look at other attempts of creating archives with yet unknown use cases which date back to the beginning of the 20th century. Finally, I will look at the role of traditional archives and how they deal with diverse and changing expectations by the public when it comes to collection policies and access to their collections in a digital world.

Audiovisual forms of collecting information has had several predecessors in Germany throughout the 20th century. One example are the twenty interviews which were recorded between 1954 and 1960 by the German filmmaker and founder of the *Deutsche Kinemathek* in Berlin, Gerhard Lamprecht. These recordings capture the stories of his previous collaborators in filmmaking as well as other film creators from that time in Germany.² According to Eva Orbanz, former head of the Kinemathek’s film collection, Lamprecht’s attempts were influenced by the French actor, screenwriter and director Sacha Guitry, who made silent movies of important personalities. The *Degeto-Deutsche Gesellschaft für Ton und Bild* (German Society for Sound and Image) serves as another predecessor of such undertakings. The *Degeto* had plans from the 1930s onwards to build a similar archive consisting of film recordings showing famous personalities. This archive was to consist of ‘famous Germans’, including: the painter Max Liebermann, the physicist Albert Einstein, the writer and intellectual Ricarda Huch, the ‘father of German broadcasting’ Hans Bredow, the founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud and the politician Konrad Adenauer.³ Another example can be found in the films of German director Hans Cürlis, who made artists portraits in the 1920s, including, for example his cycle *Schaffende Hände, die Maler* (The Creative Hands: The Painters), wherein Vasilij Kandinskij demonstrates the act of painting.⁴ While all these examples mainly focus on people of historic importance, there exist at the same time, attempts to document—at least at first glance—the insignificant. Crucial to the pre-hoc state of information collection included also the world renowned *Archives de la Planète*, founded by Albert Kahn in 1912.⁵

¹ Anne Barnert (2015), “Staatliche Filmdokumentationen. Geschichte und Idee einer Filmproduktion für die Zukunft,” in Anne Barnert (Ed.), *Filme für die Zukunft. Die Staatliche Filmdokumentation am Filmarchiv der DDR*, (Berlin: Neofelis Verlag), 29.

² Cf Eva Orbanz (2013), *Miteinander und Gegenüber. Gerhard Lamprecht und seine Zeitzeugengespräche* [With Each Other and Opposite: Gerhard Lamprecht and His Eyewitness Talks], (Munich: Edition text+kritik).

³ Announced in the German newspaper *Reichsfilmbblatt*, no 34, August 23, 1930 as quoted by Rolf Aurich, “Historische Quellen produzieren. Eine deutsche Filmtradition,” in Barnert, *Filmdokumentation am Filmarchiv der DDR*, 161.

⁴ Cf Hans Cürlis (1926), *Die Maler*, (Berlin: Institut für Kulturforschung e.V.) at www.filmportal.de/en/movie/die-maler_ea43d4a758f45006e03053d50b37753d

⁵ Cf *Archives de la Planète* [Archives of the Planet] in the *Musée départemental Albert-Kahn* at museemagazine.com/features/2019/10/22/feature-albert-kahns-archives-of-the-planet

⁶ Wolfgang Klaue (2015), “Und plötzlich hatten wir ein eigenes Filmteam,” in Eva Hahn, Hans Karnstädt, Wolfgang Klaue, Günter Schulz (Eds.), *Bilder des Jahrhunderts. Staatliches Filmarchiv der DDR 1955–1990, Erinnerungen*, (Berlin: DEFA-Stiftung), 208.

⁷ Cf Oliver Sukrow (2018), *Arbeit. Wohnen. Computer: Zur Utopie in der bildenden Kunst und Architektur der DDR in den 1960er Jahren*, (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing), 81ff. Important to note that in this text, Sukrow analyses the key role of cybernetics in the GDR which was methodologically as well as ideologically of substantial impact.

⁸ For Stalin’s interpretation of Marx and Engel’s dialectical method, see in particular J.V. Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, transcribed by M. from the original speech, Sep. 1938 at www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1938/09.htm

⁹ Sukrow, *Arbeit, Wohnen, Computer*, 78.

Category: ‘Tolerated niche with jester’s license’

The State Film Documentation (SFD)

It is important to keep in mind, that the SFD was not affiliated with any GDR film production studio at the time; it was rather a department of the *State Film Archive* (SFA). The SFA (1955–1990) was the central film archive of the GDR, with the task to collect and store all the production of the State, until it was merged with the Western German *Bundesarchiv* after the unification of Germany. In the GDR the State film archive was subordinate to the *Hauptverwaltung Film* (Central Film Administration) of the Ministry of Culture. Its collection was one of the biggest in the world and contained, amongst other items, the collection of the former *Reichsfilmarchiv* (Reich Film Archive from the Nazi period), whose holdings have been handed over by the Soviets to the GDR in 1955. It also contained all the productions of *DEFA*, the State film production company in Babelsberg where the pre-war *UFA* studios were located.

As Wolfgang Klaue, then head of the SFA, writes, the SFD was founded by the archive itself, an idea which emerged in the second half of the 1960s.⁶ While Klaue sees the establishment of a self-documentation of the GDR based largely on his personal engagement, the whole project has to be seen in a bigger political context. It emerged from the failed plans by Walter Ulbricht, First Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party from 1950 to 1971, to fund a cybernetic centre for the research and governance of society.⁷ The focus on ‘the brighter future,’ to paraphrase Stalin’s well known slogan, is grounded in a specific interpretation of Marx and Engels’ theory of historical materialism.⁸ The socialist elites in the GDR saw themselves adherent to the socialist ideology of controlling the future, thus they resorted to the instruments of planning and prognosis.⁹ In order to make planning easier, it is necessary to gather data: “A global leitmotif of the reform-friendly 1960s was the pathos formula of ‘information’, which seemed to allow planned and controllable access to the future through collection, storage and analysis of data records.”¹⁰

Cultural Minister Klaus Gysi changed the original purpose and decided to set up a studio to document personalities from public life. But it was not the frontline men of the SED-*Staatliche Einheitspartei* (The State Unity party) but rather their ‘second string’ and their

¹⁰ Sukrow, *Arbeit, Wohnen, Computer*, 76.

allies. This included, for example the second-level relations between the SED and the CDU-*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands* (Christian Democratic Union of Germany).¹¹ Even though this ‘second-string’ level of connection saw politicians like Anton Ackermann, a long standing Party functionary, willing to participate and have his portrait filmed, there was no permission from the leading Party members. This gave a particular middle-level strength or aliveness to the archive despite the Party officially silent on the information and the manner in which it was collected.

Category: ‘Unvarnished reality’

The fundamental idea and driving force behind the establishment of the SFD in the early 1970s was the impression that the history of the GDR had only been documented unsatisfactorily by the State. There were also connections to a documentary film project in the Soviet Union, which can be seen as a forerunner of the East German one, the so called *kinoletopis* (film chronicle).¹² The footage was recorded by a production group at the *Moscow Central Studio for Documentary Films*, which were deposited in the film archive of the Soviet Ministry of the Interior. The GDR sent staff members from the DEFA and the SFA to Moscow with the task to study these newsreels, which can be seen as the best strategy to guarantee that they were on safe grounds ideologically. The GDR aimed at creating historical records in a continuous manner, and because of that there were already promising first steps made in the years 1958, 1960 and 1962 to founding a so-called *Filmothek* at the DEFA. Finally, in 1968, the Ministry of Culture commissioned, as Barnert documents, “a central, systematically and comprehensively conceived film documentation as a department of the GDR film archive,” for the first time under the name *Staatliche Filmdokumentation*.¹³

In the beginning of the 1970s the archive was allowed to put two members of staff and financial resources on the project in order to produce film documents which could serve as the desired historical sources. The initial idea was to place production orders with suitable partners, like the film schools, the DEFA studio but also private film producers, while the supervision and decisions on content should remain with the archive. However, only one or two documents were eventually made that way, because the *Academy for Marxist-Leninist*

¹¹ Thomas Grimm (2000), “Verrat der Quellen. Die Staatliche Filmdokumentation,” in Jordan Günter and Ralf Schenk (Eds.), *Schwarzweiß und Farbe. DEFA-Dokumentarfilme 1946–92*, (Potsdam: Filmmuseum), 358.

¹² Documenting this point and the remarks that follow, see Barnert, *Staatliche Filmdokumentationen*, 29–157.

¹³ Barnert, *Staatliche Filmdokumentationen*, 44.

currency [ˈkarənsi]

an economy of distribution/flow, which, in so flowing, engorges the object(s) of exchange, circulation and produces in its wake a certain kind of debt. this debt can, at the best of times, enable the exchange/ plurality of difference and may be able to form the basis of an ethical-political community. cf pierre klossowski's living currency or golding's 9th technology of otherness. however, and more often than not, currency/exchange can generate something far more sinister, usually involving some form of corpuscular greed, empty value, trash bonds, national debt and hatred of the Other. cf the buying and selling of options and futures.

Organizational Sciences (AMLO) was dissolved around the same time, which meant that film production equipment and personnel could be taken over in 1971 by the SFA.¹⁴ By this lucky coincidence, the archive had unexpectedly Western-German equipment for 16 mm material and for sound recordings at their disposal.¹⁵ The film archive suddenly had its own film studio, but also a multitude of additional problems. The conditions had to be created for the team to be able to work. Work spaces were needed, a 16 mm rewinding table, a viewing table, a projector, a screen, their own car, provision of the required film stock. As Klaue remembers:

“Owning our own film team was something unique in the world of film archives, especially if one remembers that the original task of a film archive would be directed only towards collection, preservation, cataloguing and giving access to the audiovisual heritage. This was also true for the activities of the State Film Archive.”¹⁶ As has been pointed out by film historians as well as Klaue himself, there is a long standing tradition of producing their own relevant historical sources in the name of the State or the ruling party. The so-called FdP-*Filmarchiv der Persönlichkeiten* (Film Archive of the Personalities, also a Nazi undertaking) is as an example for such efforts, which was integrated into the *Deutsche Kulturfilmzentrale* (German Centre for Cultural Films) in 1941, thus becoming part of Goebbles’ Ministry for Propaganda. This collection consisting of 75 to 80 portraits which were produced up until 1944, when *Totale Krieg*, the ‘total war,’ began and was not intended for publication but stored to be used by future generations. Film historian Rolf Aurich situates the SFD firmly in the tradition of the FdP, even if this viewpoint was not acceptable in the GDR for ideological reasons. He quotes Gerhard Jeschke, the main protagonist of the FdP activities, who wrote in 1950: “It was my intention with these films to preserve a glimpse into the life and work of great men of our time for generations to come. If I had the necessary means today I would film men like Hahn, Heisenberg, Gründgens, Prof. Windau and others.”¹⁷ The films are preserved in the *Bundesarchiv*, but there is no comprehensive research done on the material to date. Summarising Barnert writes:

“Even in the decades before, there had been repeated attempts to create a comprehensive and systematic film documentation independent of media coverage as a source of contemporary

¹⁴ Barnert, *Film-dokumentation am Filmarchiv der DDR*, 209.

¹⁵ The relevant internal documents created in the SFA and Ministry of Culture have been listed on the DEFA website at defa-stiftung.de/defag-eschichte/filmes-der-ddr/280-film-dokumentation/ and can also be consulted at the Bundesarchiv under the corresponding archival numbers.

¹⁶ Klaue, *Und plötzlich hatten wir ein eigenes Filmteam*, 210.

¹⁷ It should be clear that in making this statement Jeschke expresses his ambivalent attitude towards his Nazi past by suggesting that he would include both Nazis and their opponents. Rolf Aurich (2015), “*Historische Quellen produzieren. Eine deutsche Filmtradition*,” in Barnert (ed), *Film-dokumentation am Filmarchiv der DDR*, (Berlin: Neofelis Verlag), 168.

history for future users. The inspiration for the SFD in this sense were collections in the *Reichsfilmarchiv* (Reich Film Archive) of the years 1942–44 as well as the facilities of the DEFA studio for newsreel and documentary films since 1949 with a film archive for government recordings and since 1965 with a film library.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Barnert, *Staatliche Filmdokumentationen*, 34.

It may seem quite unusual that a film archive produces documentaries about its State and its people; it may seem quite contrary to filmmaking whereby the archive collects the footage and merely places it on shelves; it may seem quite uncanny, where by footage patiently awaits future generations, who will live in better circumstances than the present world could conceivably offer. This is the strange history of the State Documentary of the GDR. Indeed the SFD collection is still relatively unknown and published only in German. Nevertheless, the SFD may serve as a striking example of the practice of collecting images for generations to come.

These documentaries were meant to record the ‘unvarnished reality,’ ‘life as it is,’ and thus were meant to preserve, even unintended, a counter counter-reality to the one presented in official media coverage. On the one hand, this is not so far away from the Duchamp’s ‘found object’; on the other hand, it is very, very far away from that found-footage. The small Berlin film studio on Rosenthaler Platz had unlimited footage available in 16 mm and scripts could be developed that had been considered significant by the staff documentarists themselves. Many of these topics were still taboo for State-monopolised media in 1984–85. The niche SFD thus became part of the collective long-term memory GDR. Although the Eastern German society was planned through, there were some creative freedoms that were, at least semi-consciously, planned to soothe the bad conscience.¹⁹

¹⁹ Grimm, *Die Staatliche Filmdokumentation*, 361.

Category: ‘Imagined scale’ linked to ‘life as it is’

The mirror into which one wanted to look, reflected back too vague a self-image. So there was an ‘imagined scale’ as presented as a kind of guideline for cinematic self-reflection.²⁰ ‘Today’ defined tomorrow’s image; evaluation and control inevitably came into play as theoretical factors, whereas free documentation had fewer opportunities. This meant that apart from documenting ‘life as it really was’, it not only enabled a contrasting approach to official media coverage; it also

²⁰ Aurich, *Historische Quellen produzieren*, 188.

²¹ Barnert, *Staatliche Filmdokumentationen*, 258.

²² For a comprehensive filmography, *Ibid.*, 304–18.

supplemented official media coverage. The management of the SFA conceived the footage as a starting material for further processing by future directors, publicists, historians and sociologists: “They want to capture typical processes and phenomena in social development for our descendants. This provides in later years information about ways of life and behaviour, traditions, habits.”²¹

In the 15 years of the SFD’s existence, 320 documentaries were produced, all of which survive in the *Bundesarchiv*.²² The images do not officially exist since they show loneliness, desolate houses and non-functional infrastructure. They were meant to document the struggle of the beginning of the GDR, hopefully long over by the time these historical documents would be used to underline the contrast between the difficult past and the glorious contemporary times. It seems significant that the leaders of the Party (like Erich Honecker or Walter Ulbricht) were not willing to be recorded and are therefore absent from the documentation, while lower ranking people were interviewed—sometimes quite openly critical of certain political topics. For example Karl Mewis, Head of the SPK—*Staatliche Plankommission* (State Planning Committee), who was in charge of the collectivisation of the farming industry, talked about the pressure which had been put on farmers to obey. The SFD wanted to dive into the daily life of the GDR citizens and record life in all its aspects—again, without any official political orders. Every new Head of the SFD came with new ideas and topics. These films are now summarised as *Berlin-Totale*, ‘Life as it is’: shops and sales talks or the first steps of the newlyweds Möllers into married life (who are accompanied whilst looking for a flat, borrowing and buying their furniture). It was the ‘typical’ that the SFD was after, the non-acted, real life people of their State, while the reporters remained unobtrusive.

After the initial interviews, new and experimental formats were explored. Klaue points out that the team at the SFD was not satisfied with merely recording talking heads; aesthetic development came naturally. This was difficult to achieve with the documentary genre and as a result imaginary augmentation seemed a reasonable move:

“A professional cameraman cannot find satisfaction in repeatedly pointing his camera onto a fixed location and maybe changing the optics only two or three times every 30 minutes. Editors were frustrated because they had limited influence over what was said in front of the camera [...]”

Klaue further explains:

“In all the years of the existence of the SFD, no conclusive answer has been found to the question of what aesthetic principles must be respected in a film document. To what extent is the use of cinematic means legitimate? Camera work, lighting, sound, editing, montage. To what extent can the subjective factor be applied to a film document from the recording to the final production? We have not found a definitive answer to this question. Perhaps the verification will succeed with historical distance. SFD’s productions cover a wide range of design possibilities.”²³

Aurich adds that even if the production of the SFD are seen mainly or only as ‘historical sources’ in first place, once they become edited documentaries the footage can constitute artworks, even if the genre is not clear:

“As film they are dependent on the time of their production, their reception and their understanding, of the respective individuals and their predispositions. [...] But they always present more than what they want to tell and communicate. Always more than what is immediately to be seen and heard. The variety of possibilities and meanings, the context from which they come and in which they may be understood is hard to estimate. At least, they do not deliver contexts anyway. These should first be exposed if films are to give us information. Also, and especially for films whose function at the time of creation was decidedly formulated as that of a source. Dismissed from this narrow meaning, the films can be brushed as sources against the grain.”²⁴

In all of this, the independence of the SFD is emphasised. For example, officially the department was supposed to see and sign off all scripts for planned productions, but this actually never happened.²⁵ The film projects were never secret, though, and were never locked away. On the other hand, the films were not shown in public, apart from four titles at the 2nd *National Documentary Festival* in Neubrandenburg in 1979.²⁶ After the event, attempts (unsuccessful) were made to put the SFD under the control of the *Staatliche Zulassungskommission* (State Admissions Committee) in order to prevent screenings of their productions. The uneasiness with recording the GDR grew when it became clear that the ‘bright future’ was not to come soon and the essentially quite innocent recordings could be

²³ Klaue, *Und plötzlich hatten wir ein eigenes Filmteam*, 212–3.

²⁴ Aurich, *Historische Quellen produzieren*, 191–2.

²⁵ Klaue, *Und plötzlich hatten wir ein eigenes Filmteam*, 213.

²⁶ Grimm, *Die Staatliche Filmdokumentation*, 357.

²⁷ Bolesław Matuszewski (1995), "A New Source of History," at frieze.com/article/new-source-history-0. See also: Jan Uhde, "100 Years of Cinema: Remembering Bolesław Matuszewski," in *Kinema*, (Waterloo: University of Waterloo). Original document at B. Matuszewski (2006), *Écrits cinématographiques: Une nouvelle source de l'histoire / La Photographie animée ce qu'elle est, ce qu'elle doit être*, (Paris: Association Française de Recherche).

²⁸ I have written about this point extensively. See Adelheid Heftberger (2015), "Propaganda in Motion: Dziga Vertov's and Aleksandr Medvedkin's Film Trains and Agit Steamers of the 1920s and 1930s," in *Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe 1*. DOI: doi.org/10.17892/app.2015.0001.2. See also A. Heftberger (2016), *Kollision der Kader: Dziga Vertovs Filme, die Visualisierung ihrer Strukturen und die Digital Humanities*, (München: edition text+kritik).

regarded as critical testimonies. Finally the SFD was abandoned, due to technical difficulties: it was impossible to maintain the equipment, whilst simultaneously attending to content-related issues which could not be solved by the team and their Head. With deep regret (even in 2015) and not on official orders, Klaue, as the Head of the SFA decided to give up the film production of the archive.

Category: 'Capturing' the temporary dimension (moving image as sensorial sources of history)

I propose that with the film medium, the attempts to document the typical were soon directed towards integrating a temporal dimension. In his 1898 seminal article, "A New Source of History," Polish cameraman Bolesław Matuszewski campaigned for a film archive, a place for historical cinematography, because the new medium would be perfect to accurately capture, "exactly and precisely the actions and spectacles of a documentary interest."²⁷ At the same time the camera would record sources of 'anecdotal history' or documents of personal history. Examples can be found in the Soviet Union, where filmmakers like Dziga Vertov and Aleksandr Medvedkin travelled on so-called Agit-trains to organise public screenings of peasants in the Soviet villages or showed films in the streets of Soviet cities.²⁸

Capturing objects and time on celluloid (and photographs) was what the French businessman Albert Kahn tried to do in his *Archives de la Planète* in Paris, which was in operation between 1908 and 1931. This multimedia archive was founded and financed by the Jewish-French banker Albert Kahn with, as Amad puts it, "the express purpose of capturing and storing the transformation of everyday life in the modern world."²⁹ Once again, this archive was never meant for public usage. Kahn was eager to use the most advanced technologies of his time, supplying his cameramen with the first ever colour process, the Autochrome plate invented by the Brothers Lumière in 1907. The collection was the largest worldwide comprising more than 72,000 colour photographs, more than 4,000 stereo images and over 100 hours of film material in 35 mm, containing unedited footage of early nonfiction film.

It constitutes one of the most ambitious undertakings of the new media of the time: "Whereas others dreamed about and debated film's archival and everyday affinities," Paula Amad points out, "Kahn

²⁹ Paula Amad (2015), *Counter-Archive: Film, the Everyday, and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète*, (New York: Columbia University Press), 5.

constructed a literal film archive devoted to recording the diversity of global daily life.”³⁰ The majority is unedited footage and until recently has not been the focus of scholarly studies. It has, equally, eluded the attention of cinema and exhibition curators. Amad further analyses the influences by French philosophers and film theorists of the time, focussing on Henri Bergson, who was notably critical of cinema. Amad reminds us, that Bergson had been hired by Albert Kahn in the late 1870s as a teacher and, subsequently, he became a close friend of the founder of the *Archives de la Planète*. In her study, Amad argues that it is Bergson’s concept of the ‘habitual’ and the ‘typical’ which became central to what would constitute a filmic archival discourse on ‘everyday life’ and ultimately an archive like Kahn’s. As she further notes:

“Film’s ability to record and store the raw data of routine experiences, transient details, uneventful moments, ordinary gestures, and casual occurrences—the side of life that Bergson summed up with the word *habitude*—produced one of the central *topoi*, or network of ideas and associations, of interwar French film culture.”³¹

French filmmaker and, arguably overlooked, film theorist, Germaine Dulac was also in favour of newsreels which she saw as bearing historical importance in terms of expressing both verbally and visually a temporal atmosphere, which only now becomes apparent. Dulac writes:

“If we are so often disappointed [with the conventional news stories], the reason is this: [news] events are of two kinds: there is the blockbuster event—sudden and important; and then there is the slow-burn kind of event, which evolves as the days go by and whose meaning becomes clearer only with time. The striking and the subtle event.”³²

As Amad points out, when Germaine Dulac wrote the above sentences in 1936, she had mostly newsreels in her mind. But it is also true for many recordings within documentary and amateur films of which many hours survive in archives and many other institutions. They probably make up the bulk of film material in film archives and are characterised by a wealth of different genres and different contexts of creation over the years of film production. They record images which document the important historical events as well as

³⁰ Amad, *Counter-Archive*, 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Germaine Dulac as quoted in Amad, *Counter-Archive*, 164.

private moments or the “minor events of social life, documenting the ‘anecdotal side of history’,” as Bolesław Matuszewski called it.³³

³³ Matuszewski, *A New Source of History*, at frieze.com/article/new-source-history-0

Category: Effect and shadow—how to locate the mundane

An historical event does not always appear where one expects it. It is far from the case that ‘History’ is composed solely of scheduled solemnities, organised in advance and ready to pose in front of the lenses. It is the beginnings, initial movements, unattended facts that avoid capture by the a ‘new source of history’ as the photographic or moving image, just as they escape inquiry. As Matuszewski reflects:

³⁴ Matuszewski, as referenced in Uhde, *100 Years of Cinema*, 322.

“Historical effects are always easier to seize than causes. But the two shed light upon each other; these effects will always bring in the broad daylight of cinematography but will also cast bright flashes of light upon causes lying in their shadow. To secure not all there is, but all that can be secured, is an excellent result for any type of inquiry, scientific or historical. Even oral accounts and written documents do not deliver to us all the class of facts to which they correspond, and nevertheless History exists, true after all in its broad outlines, even if its details are distorted.”³⁴

³⁵ Henri Bergson, as quoted in Amad, *Counter-Archive*, 96.

At best, these moments can only be highly subjective parts of the past; even with the best of intentions, archives are not—and cannot be—a comprehensive storage facility for human memories. As French philosopher Henri Bergson concludes: “Memory, as we have tried to prove, is not a faculty of putting away recollections in a drawer, or of inscribing them in a register. There is no register, no drawer; there is not even, properly speaking, a faculty [of memory].”³⁵

³⁶ Guiding questions from directors Loressa Clisby and Kevin Macdonald for their video recordings made by private people to be uploaded on YouTube for the crowdsourced 2010 documentary project *A Life in a Day*, directed by L. Clisby and K. Macdonald (2001), 1’35”.

Category: Emotional intensity [‘What do you love? What do you fear? What’s in your pocket?’]³⁶

In the world of YouTube and other networked platforms, we now turn to memory as a collecting archive and representation of this process as media transformation. In Kathryn Bigelow’s dystopian film *Strange Days* (1995), media devices called ‘squid’ discs contain recordings that allow a user to experience the recorder’s memories, emotions and physical sensations.³⁷ Presented as point of view shots in the film, every cherished memory in the form of film clips can thus be brought back in the most realistic manner and thus never be forgotten. Of course this has little to do with how a human actually remembers;

³⁷ *Strange Days* (1995), directed by Kathryn Bigelow 2’25”.

nevertheless, this Hollywood movie deals with quite innovative—if not futuristic for the time—technological methods of how to archive recordings with personal value rather than universal value. By being able to bring back certain pieces of the past in full intensity, the main protagonist also cannot blame the trauma of his break-up as the sole responsibility of his girlfriend. Condemned to re-live the same feelings he experienced by the break-up he cannot develop a healthy distance to the past; he simply cannot forget. Dealing with cultural objects is usually not quite as intense, although moving images have come quite close to presenting cultural objects as supposedly ‘exact’ representation of bygone incidents. This holds yet another form of ‘intensity’—not quite sentient, but compelling nevertheless.

We must ask of contemporary artists / archivists: what are the intentions of people or institutions today in collecting, documenting and archiving for future generations? Which values and aims do we ascribe to these archival records? How are they catalogued and indexed when we do not know any more than had been the case with SFD, in what future generations will be interested? How we interact, contribute, explore and use archival collections nowadays raises not only technical questions of software as tools to annotate, visualize and make objects and their data searchable. As cultural producers, we have to ask ourselves substantial questions of how and why we collect (or not), how we write collection policies, on what basis we decide what we see as meaningful and worth preserving for future generations.

We as individuals also collect and preserve, following our own private policies, storing data on hard drives or in boxes on shelves. These discrepancies are what innovative thinkers challenge, especially those who are active within the wider context of archival theory, museum studies, library and information sciences and knowledge design. Included in that group of innovative thinkers, Jeffrey Schnapp develops different approaches in his *metaLab* at Harvard University. With projects such as *Curarium*—intended as a collection of collections and an ‘animated archive’—his lab has been established to overcome the traditional practises by crowdsourcing annotation, curation, and augmentation of works within and beyond their respective collections.³⁸

³⁸ As paraphrased from Jeffrey Schnapp (2013), *Curarium: A Collection of Collections: collections, collections-based teaching, crowdsourcing, curation, data visualization, digital humanities, exhibitions, interactive media, museum innovation, visualization*, (Cambridge: Harvard University), at jeffreyschnapp.com/2013/09/24/curarium-a-collection-of-collections/

³⁹ Cf Lev Manovich (2018), *AI Aesthetics*, (Moscow: Strelka Press Kindle edition). See also his *Cultural Analytics Lab* at lab.culturalanalytics.info/

⁴⁰ Cf “*Life in a Day Distills 4,500 Hours of Intimate Video into Urgent Documentary*,” 29 July 2011, at wired.com/2011/07/life-in-a-day-interviews/

⁴¹ *Smoke* (1995) directed by Wayne Wang, 1’52”.

⁴² Roland Barthes (1981), “*Studium and Punctum*,” in his *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard, (New York: Hill and Wang), 25–6. See also the seminal work of Michel de Certeau (2011), *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1981), translated by Steven F. Rendall, (Berkeley: University of California Press).

Another key figure is Lev Manovich who visualises and analyses huge amounts of cultural data produced by people on an everyday level at his *Cultural Analytics Lab*.³⁹ Many more projects recently completed open up archives of cultural institutions or scrape data from social networks, some in the context of the digital humanities, some in the social sciences, others originating within libraries, archives and museums.

There are artistic projects which focus on ‘mundane’ facts like private or self-recorded memories to depict our world and its people, either by slicing synchronously or diachronically. During the 1930s, artist collective *Mass Observation*, asked hundreds of volunteers in Britain to describe the details of their life during one month. Drawing inspiration from *Mass Observation*, the 2010 *A Life in a Day*, crowd-sourced material from over 80,000 clips—a total of 4,500 hours—all of which had been recorded and uploaded by users on YouTube. Explaining his motivation, one of the directors, Macdonald, candidly remarked:

“My aim was to create a whole movie from intimate moments—the extraordinary, the mundane, the preposterous—and thereby take the temperature of the planet on a single day, 24 July. [...] The inspiration for me was a British group from the 1930s called the *Mass Observation* movement. They asked hundreds of people all over Britain to write diaries recording the details of their lives on one day a month and answer a few simple questions: ‘What do you have on your mantle piece?’ or ‘Tell us the names of five dogs you meet this week.’ These diaries were then organized into books and articles with the intention of giving voice to people who were not part of the ‘elite’ and to show the intricacy and strangeness of the seemingly mundane. I simply stole the idea!”⁴⁰

Another example is *Smoke* (1995), where the protagonist photographs the same crossroad every morning for many years, documenting the ‘same’ shot and carefully placing each in a series of photo albums.⁴¹ In this documentation, unexpected objects can artistic appear without intentionally searching. We can read this as an example for Barthes’ *punctum*, where we are suddenly taken by a personal, affective artistic reaction to an image, which makes the universally significant relations disappear.⁴² This ‘temporal thin-slicing’ is still a popular method not only in filmmaking but also in painting and critical writing.⁴³

⁴³ See for example Christa Wolf (2008), *Ein Tag im Jahr 1960–2000* [One Year in a Day], (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag) where she documents one day each year (the

27th of September) over a period of several decades describing the events of that day and her reflections about it. See also the work of painter Pierre Imhof,

12 months/ 365 days/ one year in the life, London: Exhibition at Dash Gallery, 1995 at www.pierreimhof.com/exhibitions/

Category: Temporal thin-slicing, 'un-curation' and the traditional archive

The differing initiatives mentioned highlight three axes using contemporary media in relation to the archive and its documentation. Those axes are: first, what is the role of a traditional archive for collecting and storing artefacts and images today; second, how would one classify and catalogue the multitude of 'un-curated,' heterogeneous and multimedia documents using traditional cataloguing and documentation practices; and finally, how to interpret or make sense of these recordings, now and into the future.

I have outlined the way in which Kahn followed Bergson's idea, where the meaning of life can be 'captured' in the archive, be it oral, written or visual. This position is echoed by Brunhes (1913), when he writes:

"[The main task of the photographic archive is ...] to employ those instruments which have just been born in order to capture and conserve the facts of the planet which are going to die. [...] a sort of true picture of life in our age, constituting the monument *par excellence* of consultation for those who will come after us."⁴⁴

With the rise of platforms such as YouTube or web projects dedicated to specific topics and personal archives, as well as growing collections of life-recording micro-data made by one's emails, smart watches and mobile phones, one has to ask how relevant traditional cultural heritage institutions continue to be. Many archives acknowledge the importance of the 'selfie' and with billions of data uploaded to Instagram, vimeo, snapChat or Facebook, these platforms provide the basis for a different way to write history and make cultural analysis. However, the sheer mass of data is just overwhelming, particularly where archives struggle to find appropriate ways of organising their collections (for example cataloguing, subject indexing, long term archiving). This is not a new experience for film archivists who still battle with the so-called analogue backlogs of millions of items on film material and paper to be accessed and integrated into archival record management and storage systems. While scholars understandably demand that archives should also deal with a broader spectrum of digital data produced from multiple inputs, traditional institutions simply do not have the resources to deal with this task. Does this mean that traditional archival tools and catalogues are not able to handle the different formats of visual cultural production?

⁴⁴ Amad, Paula. *Counter-Archive*, 60. The first film images were dedicated to so-called typical events or everyday people, for example the short films by the brothers Lumière or early newsreels. These give us more an impression of people posing for still photography. This is not to suggest that either the archive or photography is about capturing time. It is to emphasise the problems that archivists face when determining pragmatically how to store memories of the future, as well as those of the present, the past and the not yet imagined.

In my view, there is the need to integrate existing and traditional approaches to the archive with new and alternative information systems. Archives need to develop cooperatively alternative tools for subject indexing and retrieval, which is both a technological challenge (video analysis, automated indexing, deep learning) and artistic and intellectual challenge, targeting more comprehensive and inclusive strategies to manage and to enrich records. Setting up meaningful crowdsourcing projects, inviting the disenfranchised into the archive to contribute to the collection and help with creating annotations or organising *Edithons* and *Hackathons* are just a few examples for new ways of engaging with the public.

Irrespective of why one collects and for whom, the overarching pragmatic question remains: what can we do with these ever proliferating everyday images, this visual storehouse of history? The answer is not to shy away from the proliferation of data and its recordings, but to immerse more fully with the everyday—to record in the widest sense of the terms anti-heroic, the mundane, the sensuous and the seemingly insignificant. Writing an alternative history which differs from the privileged moments of heroic stories is only possible if there is enough ephemeral visual data available. Amateur films and home movies remain both historical sources as well as aesthetic manifestations in their own right.⁴⁵

Immersing ourselves more fully with the massive proliferation of everyday data, it is to understand that the archive is nothing more nor less than the gritty processes that makes history ‘available’. But let us not just tell ‘the one story’ but a polyphony of stories to create the history of humankind. And, why not let people create these stories themselves by engaging not only with data creation and enrichment, but also with navigating through the archival items and records, creating their own relevant versions. The responsibility of the archive would thus include not only the traditional ones like collecting, storing, presenting and so on, but also provide new ways of accessing and producing tools for visualisation and story-telling for their users, on their premises but also on the internet, the zoomiverse, and 3D holographic e-rooms.

⁴⁵ An outstanding example is the “*Ephemeral Films Project: National Socialism in Austria*” by the Austrian Film Museum and the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute for History and Society (both Vienna) which is dedicated to annotating and presenting amateur footage in relation to the *Anschluss* (the annexation of Austria to the German Reich) in 1938. See: <http://efilms.ushmm.org/>

curved time [k3:vd taim]

chronos operates in a variety of ways, but none more interesting than when it shape-shifts completely away from its linear sequence (where linearity stands in, for example, a functionally paced past-present-future line dance). maxwell was not the first, but he was certainly one of the first who realised that earth-time is gravitationally challenged, being pulled (as it were) towards the planet at every dot-wave-bundle of its ‘next’. given this conundrum, some go as far as to suggest there is no such thing as time, only the velocity (and convenience) that makes it ‘count’ (matter, organise).