

Challenges of archiving contemporary Ukrainian cultural heritage (film production as a case study)

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Abstract

The article focuses on the challenges of the archiving process and various initiatives dedicated to preserving the cultural heritage from the early independence period in Ukraine. The text will cover the institutional, legal, economic, and technical aspects of the archival turn—that is, conventions of conservation—and also non-paper and non-written sources for contemporary Ukrainian history and culture. The Dovzhenko Film Centre, digital restoration of Ukrainian films, and the Kino-Teamp thematic journal of theatre and cinema resources will serve as examples from the film production field and as starting points for depicting a complex question of records vanishing from virtual space, the service life of carriers, and outdated formats. The aim is to identify reasons and practices that, until 2022, impeded the effective preservation and dissemination of some written and visual sources of the history of independent Ukraine.

Keywords: archival turn, cinematic sources, digital restoration, Ukrainian films

Introduction

1991 moves away from us at great speed, to paraphrase Derrida,¹ raising a number of questions regarding archiving records of the recent past. The dire 2022 war will inevitably present a clear caesura in the history of contemporary Ukraine. Preserving scholarly objectivity is now a major challenge for researchers as the tragedy of war affects the places where they conducted their research, resources whose preservation may be threatened, and above all, the people whose efforts were directed at preserving historical traces and Ukrainian cultural heritage in general. This article concerns subject matter from a time immediately preceding this caesura – the archiving of sources from a discrete part of post-Soviet period in Ukraine: the years between 2015 and 2021. This period partially overlaps with the research conducted for my doctoral thesis on visions of the past in Ukrainian fictional feature films produced after 1991.² In my dissertation, I addressed the question of the national identity of a feature film, grouped films referring to a specific historical phenomenon, and identified state and non-state actors involved in film production and, consequently, in broadly defined memory politics. My aim was to shift the focus from the state's official policy, actions, and declarations to an analysis of the conditions that influenced the emergence of specific visions of the past. My research covered not only film content, but the whole

¹ “[...] classical and extraordinary works move away from us at great speed, in a continually accelerated fashion. They burrow into the past at a distance which is more and more comparable to that which separates us from archaeological digs [...], from biblical philology, from the translations of the Bible, from Luther to Rozenzweig or to Buber, or from the establishing of the hypomnesic writings of Plato or of Aristotle by medieval copyists.” (Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995, p. 18).

² I defended the thesis in February 2021 at the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

production context, which I reconstructed using online publications of Ukrainian magazines (along with archival publications on websites), online news services, and websites of radio and TV stations. In my research, I referred to feature films as sources to examine political transformation over the last 30 years. While conducting this research, I had the opportunity to witness the changes taking place in Ukraine regarding Ukrainian post-Soviet heritage. What I recorded was the progressive decomposition and destruction of infrastructure and the old structures, rather than significant development and progress according to a coherent plan from above. I conducted my research at the Dovzhenko Film Centre, Dovzhenko Film Studio, and explored the virtual archives of film magazines, among others. The field study I carried out turned out to be as valuable as written and cinematic sources. This helped me to understand the nature and the specific character of these Ukrainian cultural institutions and to identify the problems besetting archival materials, as well as the archiving process itself, when it comes to preserving written and audio-visual traces of recent Ukrainian film culture. Following the concept of the archival turn, I will examine Foucault's historical *a priori*—the conditions governing the archiving process of how traces of the past have been selected, formed or transformed, and enabled to appear (Foucault, 1972, pp. 129–130) in the Ukrainian case.

Incomplete modernisation

When I first visited the Dovzhenko Centre in 2016, the building looked gloomy and terrifying. The interior was under renovation. To reach the archives, you had to walk among raw walls where workers cut metal elements, showering the space in golden sparks. The staff were surprised to see me (as they also were in the Dovzhenko Film Studio archive). They opened a small archive room but discouraged me from my research, suggesting I wouldn't find anything there. The inventory was rather a work in progress; it was hard to believe that the origins of this Ukrainian film archive went back to the early 1990s. The Oleksandr Dovzhenko National Centre was established by a special decree of President Leonid Kuchma in 1994. For six years, the Centre did not have its own space and worked from a rented office of the Kyiv Film Printing Factory, founded in 1938 in the south-western part of Kyiv near the Holosiivska Metro Station. This factory producing film tape had been one of the largest in the Soviet Union.

However, film productions in Ukraine declined sharply in the early years of independence, and then film tape release prints fell out of common use as a result of the technological revolution. The factory was closed down and since 2003 the Dovzhenko Centre has been accommodated on the land and 4 buildings inherited from the factory (Молодковець, 2021; Козленко, 2018).³ Part of the infrastructure has been leased to private owners since the mid-1990s, but because of the opaque and confusing legal situation of the property, the Centre is taxed for the whole of the land area, a heavy burden on the institution's budget (Головко, 2020). The Centre began its transformation from an industrial institution into a multicultural hub from 2011,⁴ a process that was supposed to accelerate after the Revolution of Dignity and the implementation of a development plan in 2014. The latter measure, however, could not change entrenched customs, official practices or the lack of transparency in the

³ The buildings were built in the 1950s and 1970s. The central one is a striking example of the industrial architecture of the Brezhnev era.

⁴ The main activity of the institution until 2016 was production of audio, video and software support (Козленко, 2018).

structure of the institutions that took over the management of former Soviet infrastructure. After all, an important aspect of Ukrainian reality since 1991 is the way that modernisation plans happen to be blocked and official decisions simply ignored (Гриценко, 2017, p. 39).

In 2020, conflict flared up between the Centre management, who were accused of some formal negligence by state central institutions. The latter in turn were accused by the Centre of sabotage (i.e., blocking the transfer of operating funds), incompetence, and following their own absurd, surreal principles. Ivan Kozlenko, the Centre's director until 2021, also argues that part of the problem is the law on culture, written in the late 1990s by the Ukrainian intelligentsia with a focus on the revival of national traditions. According to him, it is rather a palimpsest overlooking several periods of Ukrainian independent history, a kind of a monument to the aspirations of the authorities in power, than a legal guideline and modern framework (Головко, 2020). As a result, Kozlenko decided not to apply for an extension after his contract expired in 2021. Olena Honcharuk, the former director of the Cinema Museum at the Centre, should now be his successor but at time of writing she still has not been officially appointed by the Ministry of Culture due to a complaint from a competitor, Alexei Dushutin⁵ (Молодковець, 2021; Барчук, 2022; Горобець, 2021). According to Honcharuk, information flow simply does not work at the Ministry of Culture, at least between the minister and his deputy. In her opinion, the authorities responsible do not understand the specificity of work at modern cultural institutions, or their roles as communicating vessels carrying out a variety of tasks. Honcharuk drew attention to the fact that the Centre needs an established and stable structure to fulfil its main assigned duty—preserving the broad spectrum of cinematic heritage in a modern sense, including the functionality of film in the social space (Київ Media, 2021). The goal has been implemented *inter alia* by such initiatives as preserving the letter “K” from the facade of the cinema Kinopanorama and placing it in a museum shop on the ground floor of the Centre (Стасюк, 2019).⁶

One of the key tasks of the Centre as a state institution is the maintenance of libraries and archives (Козленко, 2018) and the preservation of all national films on tape that have been produced in Ukraine with state funding, as well as those directly related to Ukraine, and other records from the film production and distribution process under Article 17 of the Law of Ukraine on cinematography (Верховна Рада України (1998)) and the Law on the state support for cinematography in Ukraine (Про державну підтримку кінематографії в Україні (Верховна Рада України (2017)). The previously mentioned modernisation plan is designed to transform the industrial space into a cultural institution, monetise resources, and ensure broad access to the archival collection through digitisation (Козленко, 2018). The Dovzhenko Centre is indeed considered the largest state film archive of Ukraine, holding more than 6,000 films, thousands of documents, and a vast array of artefacts that present all of the complex aspects of Ukrainian film production. Archival resources include a collection of films by Oleksandr Dovzhenko, digitally restored in the first decade of the 2000s under a programme funded by the state budget and commissioned by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Ukraine. The main contractor, a private company called IBS,

⁵ Alexei Dushutin is a former citizen of the Russian Federation who fled to Canada while serving a sentence for fraud and was granted Canadian citizenship.

⁶ The Kinopanorama cinema on Shota Rustaveli Street was privatised and then closed on October 1, 2018.

established a laboratory for digital restoration for this purpose, and the Dovzhenko Centre became the coordinator of the whole collection.

Digital restoration of films

Here we come to another important point regarding the conditions of preserving Ukrainian cinematic heritage from the early independence period.⁷ There are significant differences between the techniques used in the preservation, restoration, and improvement of audio-visual sources. While the digitising process refers simply to scanning the original negative into a digital format without any adjustments and reproducing the quality of image and sound of the original, remastering and digital restoration both include upgrading the existing sound and picture quality. Remastering uses software to correct damage (scratches, noise, and dust caused by mechanical, chemical or other factors, removing background noise or boosting dialogue volume) that has appeared on the original film tape. Digital film restoration, by contrast, scans and corrects the original film frame-by-frame at a resolution of at least 2K and includes filling in missing frames—an extremely expensive procedure.

The collection of Dovzhenko's films includes a short biography of the Ukrainian director, *Олександр Довженко. Роздуми після життя* [Alexander Dovzhenko. Reflections after life] (Донець, 1992). It might seem surprising that such a recently produced film requires digital restoration. However, the condition of the tape does not necessarily depend on its age; on the contrary, sometimes older films are better preserved than those from the 1980s, or even the 1990s. This is a result of the bad practice of operating only from the original copy instead of duplicating the original (Salwa, 2016, p. 22). In an interview for the Ukrainian *Кіно-Темп* journal, the general director of IBS, Iuriy Pomazkov, uncovered another significant fact. While restoring this collection, Ukrainian experts were not even able to start the procedure by scanning the original copies of Dovzhenko's films but were forced to work with scans of copies of negative and positive film⁸ provided by the Russian state film archive Gosfilmofond (Помазков, 2011, p. 35; Козленко, 2018).

These problems surrounding ownership and archive location of film studio productions from the territory of contemporary Ukraine have still not been examined. It may be difficult to do so due to the absence of official documents reporting the actual situation during this period of the USSR's decay and the subsequent period of systemic transformation. Pomazkov suggests that the archives did not provide the original negatives to anyone (Помазков, 2011, p. 34).⁹ IBS held the rights to commercial distribution of this collection until 2015; however, attempts to attract TV authorities were a failure, as most of the films were silent black-and-white pictures considered by the TV managers as *neformat*, that is, non-commercial content (Помазков, 2011, p.

⁷ Although the term 'early independence period' is a vague expression, it seems the only option in the case of this study. It relates more to the context of feature film production and distribution. In the case of Ukraine, the period that the term designates begins with the establishment of administrative structures in the newly independent country. The floating closing caesura is linked to the global process of digital format implementation. By coincidence, the events of the Dignity Revolution coincided chronologically with the progress of digitisation in Ukrainian culture.

⁸ According to Polish film operator Arkadiusz Tomiak, interviewed by the Polish journalist Ola Salwa, making a digital copy from a positive gives fewer possibilities, because it 'cuts out' certain things, while digital technology is able to extract more nuances from a well exposed negative, better showing the cinematographers' workshop (Salwa, 2016, p. 22).

⁹ The Ukrainian films made during the Soviet era were moved to the Russian State Film Fund (Молодковець, 2021).

36). Such a prevailing attitude and the lack of a marketing strategy for promoting Ukrainian cinema made monetisation of these resources impossible.

No wonder, though, since even getting state funds to produce a film bordered on a miracle. It was common practice not to pay allocated funds, which prolonged the production process of Ukrainian films for years. The film *Богдан-Зиновій Хмельницький* [Bohdan-Zynoviy Khmelnytskyi] (2006)¹⁰ directed by Mykola Mashchenko, acting at that time as the general director and artistic director of the Kyiv-based Oleksandr Dovzhenko film studio, took seven years to complete (Полищук, 2008). It would perhaps have taken even longer, had it not been for the interest of the authorities in presenting the film as part of a series of events planned for 2008 to mark the anniversary of the Khmelnytskyi uprising (Лебедь, 2008). Even the film *Молитва за гетьмана Мазепу* [Prayer for Hetman Mazepa] (2001)—granted unprecedented and effective state financial support due to the prestige of its director, Yurii Ilyenko—needed to apply for additional state funds only a few years after it was produced to make a new high-definition version with Dolby sound. However, its success in receiving the financial support is only the exception that proves the rule.

Meanwhile, attempting to encourage a younger audience who are accustomed to good quality pictures and sound to watch digitised but not remastered or restored copies of older films is impossible, or at least extremely difficult. Without these procedures, many film productions, especially from the last decades of film tape dominance, such as *Голод-33* [Famine-33] (Yanchuk, 1991), *Останній бункер* [The Last Bunker] (Ilyenko, 1991), *Вінчання зі смертю* [Wedding with death] (Mashchenko, 1992), or *Вперед, за скарбами гетьмана!* [Hunt for Cossack Gold!] (Kastelli, 1993) may soon be lost and become an archival gap or a missing puzzle piece in the history of Ukrainian cinematography.

Digitisation and dissemination—challenges of preserving the heritage

However, despite its advantages, relying solely on digitisation to ensure access to resources is questionable and carries many risks. Storing films on tape is considered the most reliable option, as the life expectancy of a tape is estimated at 200–400 years (Салій, 2015). The global archival problem of vanishing heritage arises, however, in relation not only to the material remaining, but also to the migration or even disappearance of virtual resources that are dependent on specific software. The widespread phenomenon of migrating resources raises the question of the rules to be applied when referencing virtual archives in academic texts. The widespread phenomenon of migrating resources raises the question of the rules to be applied when referencing virtual archives in academic texts¹¹ Database providers (or authorities deciding on that question) may be given, in fact, virtually unlimited power to share knowledge—illustrating Derrida’s claim that the technical methods of archiving shape both history and memory (Manoff, 2004). For instance, the *Кіно-Театр* journal archival issues, although digitised, were first migrated to the archive subpage and are now only available through the Digital Library “Culture of Ukraine” (Національна Бібліотека України ім. Ярослава Мудрого, 2011). This virtual platform provides free

¹⁰ Ukrainian film titles in this article are given in their original language and year of release with English translations, although only some have been released in translation for distribution abroad.

¹¹ Due to the current situation in Ukraine digital archive resources are the only ones available for research.

single interface access to a large number of documents from Ukrainian libraries, museums, and archives displayed on a voluntary basis under the Law “Про Основні засади розвитку інформаційного суспільства в Україні на 2007-2015 роки” [On Basic Principles of Information Society Development in Ukraine for 2007–2015] (Верховна Рада України (2007). However, the development of this initiative has been hindered by a lack of capacity and resources to carry out large-scale digitisation of cultural resources and, above all, a lack of awareness of the importance of this initiative. For example, no programme has yet been established for the complex digitisation and virtual dissemination of the various film production documents and photos from the Dovzhenko Film Studio (including those relating to the obstinately ignored film productions of the independence period). This situation makes it difficult to share knowledge about the cinematic heritage from the independence period. As a result, Ukrainian cinema from the period 1991 to 2014 is as much the stuff of legend as the lost city of Atlantis (Брюховецька, 2015, p. 12).

Maintaining virtual archives

The archive question is not only dependent on specific local conditions. Many aspects of it are related to common factors, global trends, and, generally, the technological revolution. As already suggested, the digitisation process cannot be perceived as a fully guaranteed method of heritage preservation. Moreover, we still seem to have “paper minds trying to cope with electronic realities” (Cook, 1994, p. 403) and any digital traces may prove to be much more fragile and fleeting than material remains. As Hungarian expert on data protection and freedom of information Ivan Szekely notes, uploading digitised collections in the hope that they will be available indefinitely is idealistic and techno-optimistic (Szekely, 2017, p. 10). Access to these sources, and therefore knowledge, may be limited. Therefore, digitisation needs to be more than just making digital copies for backup. According to Szekely, this is a prerequisite for conducting research (Szekely, 2017, p. 13). The constant migration of documents seems to be the future of archives and upgrading their format will be as important as ensuring appropriate storage conditions (temperature and humidity) for material documents. The migration process needs to guarantee that the documents continue to be readable, viewable, or audible (Szekely, 2017, p. 13). After all, archival technology determines “what can be archived and therefore what can be studied” (Manoff, 2004, p. 12). The selection of resources to be stored, digitised, preserved, and maintained in the virtual version is necessarily dependent on the plans and decisions of archive authorities and their implementation by archival staff. Therefore, what is discoverable or not in archives has less to do with digitisation or description, and more to do with power, both executive and economic.

When this complex nexus of factors is taken into account, it becomes evident that the endeavour to preserve the film heritage of the early independence period in Ukraine is afflicted by more than the problem of missing documents: it suffers from a kind of death drive that threatens the annihilation of memory and signals “the failure of the present in its responsibility to the future” (see Manoff, 2004, p. 12). This kind of failure in relation to the recent history of Ukraine is linked to economic factors (lack of financial support for software availability and digitisation processes) rather than to a mindset or lack of professional training. The silences and the absences of documents always speak to historians and do not leave them without clues. Strategies for addressing archival gaps include stating that they exist, searching for what is missing, whose perspectives are not represented, and what could be the reasons for these

silences (Steedman, 2001, as cited in Manoff, 2004, p. 16). Current and future gaps in the Ukrainian archives which should be the sources for examining contemporary history may also be affected by the memory abnegation strategy¹² connected with the experience of the post-Soviet period and the neglect of social and cultural value in the sources and the experiences of this period.

Conclusions

The key problems surrounding archival gaps and challenges within Ukrainian archives stem primarily from the country's turbulent modernisation processes. As a result, many archives are forced to rely on the voluntary engagement of state cultural institutions rather than state funding and this contributes, along with systemic bureaucratic weaknesses, to a failure in establishing a comprehensive archival policy to protect the cultural heritage of early independence Ukraine. The current inquiry into the preservation of recent Ukrainian film heritage marks the weak points in the procedures currently implemented. The issues encountered are partially indicative of the archival turn in its broad, global manifestation—issues pertaining to the maintenance of digital resources through provision of appropriate software and format upgrades are everywhere subject to the exercise of executive and economic power. However, in the case of Ukraine, archival gaps and challenges relate predominantly to the local context, including customs and practices inherited from the Soviet period. In addition, filmmakers and others who encounter the problems of film heritage preservation have drawn attention to specific issues surrounding the blocking of operating funds, and the incompetence of state officials adhering to ill-advised principles. The establishment of an effective archival programme is hampered by legal regulation of the flow of information and by a lack of transparent division of competencies between state cultural management institutions. Authorities seem not to understand the specificity of the work of modern cultural institutions and do not provide stable, long-term, planned support.

Illustrative of this parlous state of affairs is an episode in the conflict over the Dovzhenko Centre which took place outside the timeframe covered by this article. In August 2022, the Ukrainian State Film Agency issued a decision on the reorganisation of the Centre. The film copy archive was to be transferred to a façade institution (created in 2011), meaning that the Centre would have been liquidated both as an institution and an archival space for a wide range of materials related to production process. The Ministry claimed that the problem lay in the Centre's unclear legal and financial status, for which, it blamed the management (Міністерство культури та інформаційної політики України). In the background, however, were suggestions of lobbying by TV and show business interests and attempts by a private developer to take over the Centre's land (Подоляк, 2022). Due to resulting protests by the film community, the Parliamentary Committee on Humanitarian and Information Policy decided to recommend the cancellation of this decision to the Cabinet of Ministers and the State Film Agency. Thus, the future of the Centre remains uncertain at the time of writing. Meanwhile, the very fact that the Film Agency launched such an initiative in wartime provoked accusations of direct sabotage or even the destruction of an important asset of the state from within (Подоляк, 2022; Козленко 2022).

¹² As a psychology approach in the common understanding, not the abnegation strategy defined by Bernhard & Kubik (2014, p. 14).

Legal regulations and official recommendations have been perceived by successive decision-making authorities as manifestos of rather than as frameworks for defining procedures. Moreover, the lack of a marketing strategy to monetise cultural heritage has also had a negative impact on decisions concerning financial support for archiving processes. The value of the cultural heritage from the first period of independence is contested, as it is identified with the harsh experience of post-Soviet conditions.

However, the exchange of knowledge and know-how is also an important factor to be discussed in the case of Ukraine. This might be easily overlooked when talking about the archiving field and focusing solely on the technical, structural, and procedural aspects of archival work. The information technology revolution, widespread access to internet resources, and the implementation of visa-free travel between Ukraine and the European Union has increased the mobility of both archival staff and experts, which should be taken into account when embarking on further research into the impact of social changes affecting the Ukrainian archival field.

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