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Access vs. Preservation in National Film Archives:

The Case of the Albanian Cinema Project

Introduction

The role of national film archives has historically been to preserve and provide access to the films in their collection, which serve both as historical documents and represent the cultural heritage of their respective nations. It is generally agreed upon that there is little point in preserving films if those films are not made accessible. Likewise, access to films cannot be guaranteed for posterity without those films being preserved. What is not generally agreed upon is which should be more highly prioritized: access or preservation. While best practices in the field of audiovisual archiving generally instruct that preservation should precede access, a “one-size-fits-all” approach is difficult to enforce. The priorities of a national film archive will, in many cases, depend on the history of that nation and their respective film industry. This fact is illustrated by the efforts of the Albanian Cinema Project, an initiative to preserve films in the Albanian Central State Film Archive (AQSHF).

In this essay, I will demonstrate how Albanian history and the nature of the films in the AQSHF have lead archivists involved with the Albanian Cinema Project to prioritize access over preservation, and, in doing so, challenge popular conceptions of the function of a national film archive. I will also explore the challenges that the Albanian Cinema Project has faced in making

the films in the AQSHF accessible to an international audience, especially where Albanian copyright law is concerned.

A Brief History of Kinostudio and the AQSHF

The AQSHF grew out of the Kinostudio, Albania's state-run film production company, which was established by the communist regime in 1952 and financed by the Soviet government. The Kinostudio was the sole cinema production company in Albania during the communist period. Enver Hoxha recognized the value of cinema as a powerful ideological tool. As a result, the state allocated enormous resources to the Kinostudio, at the expense of other sectors of the economy.¹ Between 1957 and 1990, Albania produced 247 feature films.² The nation's cinematic output waned after the fall of communism and the subsequent dissolution of the Kinostudio.³ For this reason, the contents of the AQSHF are largely films produced during the Kinostudio era.

Prior to the establishment of the Kinostudio, Albania did not have its own film industry. Before World War II, many films were shot in Albania, but these were produced by foreign production companies.⁴ The development of an Albanian film industry was a priority in the early years of the Hoxha regime. In 1946, the Albanian State Enterprise of Cinematography was established, a department overseen by the Ministry of Press, Propaganda, and Popular Culture.⁵ This coincided with the nationalization of private cinemas, as well as the construction of new cinemas in remote areas of the country.⁶ In 1952, the Kinostudio opened in Tirana, and film

¹ Bruce Williams, "Red Shift: New Albanian Cinema and Its Dialogue with the Old," *A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas*, 2012, pp. 224-243, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118294376.ch12>)

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

students were sent abroad to Czechoslovakia and the USSR to be trained.⁷ In its early years, the Kinostudio produced mainly newsreels and short documentaries which were screened before foreign (mainly Soviet) feature films. However, Kinostudio began producing its own feature-length films in the late 1950s, as the nation became increasingly cut off from the rest of the world. In this way, “cinema was a vehicle employed by the state to fill the gap left by Albania’s isolation.”⁸

Within Albania, Kinostudio films were an integral part of popular culture. Between 1975 and 1990, “Albania produced an average of 13 movies a year [...] with impressive cinema attendance: 20 million seats sold in 450 outdoor and indoor theaters, annually; national attendance averaged 10 films a year.”⁹ However, the nation’s isolation under Hoxha meant that foreign distribution was practically nonexistent. The one exception to this rule was China, which became a close ally of Albania following the Sino-Soviet split. As relations between China and the USSR deteriorated, Soviet films were largely pulled from distribution in China.¹⁰ Albanian social-realist films enjoyed considerable popularity in China during the Cultural Revolution, for several reasons: “on the state level, the Albanian movies fit in with the political direction of China’s cultural governance and had filled the void left by the Sino-Soviet split. On the societal level, they brought in cultural elements that opened the Chinese world up to the West, allowing a measure of openness in a culturally restricted society.”¹¹ However, distribution of Albanian films in China was limited as the relationship between the nations became strained in the 1970s. Until recently, there has been little interest in Kinostudio-era films outside of Albania or China.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Peter Monaghan, “Saving Albania’s Film Legacy |,” Moving Image Archive News, accessed May 25, 2020, <http://www.movingimagearchivenews.org/saving-albanias-film-legacy/>

¹⁰ Simon Shen and Cho-kiu Li., “The Cultural Side-Effects of the Sino-Soviet Split: The Influence of Albanian Movies in China in the 1960s.” *Modern China Studies* 22, no. 1 (January 2015): 215–31.

¹¹ Ibid.

When the Kinostudio dissolved in 1991, the AQSHF was reestablished as a cultural heritage institution.¹² In addition to feature films produced by Kinostudio, the AQSHF contains newsreels, documentaries about different historical periods in Albanian history, animated films, ethnographic films, and more than 600 foreign-produced titles.¹³ The AQSHF also remains the place of deposit for contemporary Albanian films. There is some overlap between materials in the AQSHF and the Albanian National Archives, which is a separate entity. However, for the most part, the materials in the AQSHF are unique, and do not exist elsewhere.

The Origins of the Albanian Cinema Project

The Albanian Cinema Project (ACP) was launched in 2012, when American film archivist and scholar Regina Longo was invited to Albania by filmmakers Thomas Logoreci and Iris Elezi to provide consultation to the AQSHF. At the time, the AQSHF was struggling to care for the films in its collection due to a lack of support from the Albanian government and adequate training of archival staff, as well as environmental hazards within the archive itself. According to Longo,

The vaults where the films are currently stored are in very poor condition. The roof has been patched several times, but still leaks. The walls and floorboards are also leaking. Moisture, mold, and mildew have crept into all these cracks. The mold spores are in the air and have entered many of the film cans, causing damaging mold growth on the original camera negatives and the projection prints. The staff of the archives are constantly cleaning and re-cleaning these films reels to try to keep the damage at bay. They are exposing themselves to harmful mold without proper ventilation while performing this important task. The building is the root of the problems and it is evident that it cannot be salvaged long-term.¹⁴

¹² AQSHF, accessed May 25, 2020, <http://www.aqshf.gov.al/koleksioni.html>)

¹³ Interview with Regina Longo, April 5, 2020.

¹⁴ Regina Longo, "The Albanian Cinema Project: Saving and Projecting Albanian Film Heritage for Global Audiences," KinoKultura, accessed May 25, 2020, <http://www.kinokultura.com/specials/16/longo.shtml>)

The environmental conditions within the archive were a major concern for Longo for several reasons. First, the films in the AQSHF have an acetate base, and thus are particularly vulnerable to acetate decay, or “vinegar syndrome,” resulting from poor storage conditions. Second, because the AQSHF grew out of the Kinostudio, which comprised the entirety of the Albanian film industry under communism, the majority of Albania’s cinematic output was housed in the same building, with no other copies in existence. To address these issues, Longo drew on her connections within the audiovisual archiving world to assemble an international team of archivists to assist in preserving the films in the AQSHF.

In some sense, the ACP began as a disaster recovery project, and it remains a long-term goal of the ACP to address the macroenvironmental issues which pose a threat to the materials in the AQSHF. Ultimately, ACP hopes to repurpose a series of communist-era bunkers around Tirana as an alternative storage space for archival materials (an initiative dubbed the “ACP Bunker Project”).¹⁵ The ACP has also provided much needed supplies and training to archivists at the AQSHF. However, for Longo and others involved with the ACP, “saving” the films in the AQSHF entails “[bringing] Albanian films out of the archives and back into circulation,” as much as it involves the preservation of the films as physical objects.¹⁶ For this reason, the short-term goals of the ACP have primarily revolved around providing access to the films in the AQSHF.

The biggest success story of the ACP thus far has been the completion of the “Five Films in Five Years” initiative, the goal of which was to raise funds to restore five films in the AQSHF within a five year period. These films include Viktor Gjika’s *The Second November* (1982), Xhanfise Keko’s *Tomka and His Friends* (1977), Kujtim Çashku and Piro Milkani’s *Face to Face* (1979), Kapedani’s *The Captain* (1972), and Ngadhujm Mbi Vdekjen’s *Victory Over Death*

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

(1967). Additionally, the ACP restored a short ethnographic film with the help of students from New York University's Moving Image Archiving and Preservation (MIAP) program, as well as Dhimiter's Anagnosti's *A Tale from the Past* (1987).¹⁷ The restored versions of these films were screened internationally after premiering in Tirana.

The ACP and the Importance of Access

In some ways, the ACP's "Five Films in Five Years" initiative does not adhere to best practices for film preservation. First, there is a question of whether or not digital restoration can be considered preservation at all. In an article published in *Kinokultura*, Longo addresses this criticism:

"While the leading voices from FIAF (International Federation of Film Archives) member archives [...] recognize that film to film may remain the ideal standard, for film heritage institutions (FHI) throughout the world, for some time now this ideal has not been attainable in Europe. Thus, most European countries with smaller media industries find themselves in a bind. While governments continue to sponsor film production, a sufficient combination of public and private funding has yet to be made available to ensure full preservation of European FHI collections."¹⁸

Furthermore, the films which have been selected for what Longo referred to as "digital preservation for access" have not been the most at-risk films in the AQSHP.¹⁹ Rather, "each film chosen was popular with Albanian audiences, and [the ACP] chose popular films in order to demonstrate that communist-era Albanian films could be appreciated beyond the confines of their socialist-realist production histories."²⁰ Both of these choices demonstrate the emphasis that the

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

ACP has placed on access and international outreach, more so than preservation of the films in the traditional sense.

There are several reasons why the ACP has prioritized access in its work with the films in the AQSHF. First, Albanian cinema is a marginalized film culture. Because communist-era Albania was essentially cut off from the rest of the world, international audiences (with the exception of China) have rarely seen Albanian films produced by the Kinostudio, and the many of these films have never been translated into other languages. (The ACP's restored versions of these films have been subtitled in English and French.)²¹ By promoting and providing access to the films in the AQSHF abroad, the ACP aims not only to assert the value of Albanian film culture, but to gather support for the preservation of these films. In addition to a lack of international distribution, providing access to the films in the Albanian national archive in an exhibition context also affects the attitudes of Albanians, both living in Albania and elsewhere, towards communist-era films. As previously mentioned, the films in the AQSHF were produced by the state-run Kinostudio. For this reason, the films tend to be propagandistic in tone, and are associated with a traumatic period in Albanian history. Many Albanians who lived through the communist era have mixed feelings about Kinostudio films. Nostalgia for Kinostudio films is complicated by feelings of shame, or a belief that these films cannot be appreciated outside of Albania. By exhibiting these films in an international context, the ACP hopes to address Albanians' "inferiority complex" over their cinematic heritage by recontextualizing them and encouraging scholarship which can further assert their value.²²

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Ultimately, the ACP hopes to make the films that have been restored so far available on DVD, Blu-Ray, and VOD platforms.²³ Not only will this next phase of access allow greater circulation of the films in the AQSHF, but it will also allow the ACP to monetize those films in order to fund long-term preservation goals, such as the ACP Bunker Project, in addition to future restorations. Since its inception, the work of the ACP has been financially supported by grants and donations from cultural heritage organizations and individuals within the international archival community. Making these films available for home distribution will provide the ACP with greater financial self-sufficiency which, according to Longo, “will allow the ACP to remain independent from a specific political agenda (be it US, UK, Albania, or a greater European agenda).”²⁴ In this way, concerted efforts to provide access to the films in the AQSHF have been designed to create a financial base to support future preservation workflows.

Barriers to Access

Despite the best efforts of the ACP, making Kinostudio-era films accessible to a wider audience has been a challenge due to the uncertain rights status of the films themselves. Because Kinostudio was a state-run production company, the copyright to Kinostudio-films belonged to the state under communism, rather than the director or other any other individual involved in their creation. After Albania was reestablished as a democracy, that state no longer existed, raising questions surrounding who owns the copyright to films produced during the communist era. According to Longo, while Kinostudio-era films are physically housed at the AQSSHF, the intellectual property rights belong to the Albanian National Center of Cinematography (ANCC), a

²³ Regina Longo, “The Albanian Cinema Project: Saving and Projecting Albanian Film Heritage for Global Audiences,” KinoKultura, accessed May 25, 2020, <http://www.kinokultura.com/specials/16/longo.shtml>

²⁴ Ibid.

governmental organization overseen by the Ministry of Culture.²⁵ As a Collective Administration Agency (CAA), it is the responsibility of the ANCC to parcel any revenue resulting from the use of Kinostudio films back to individuals involved in their creation.²⁶ In this way, Kinostudio directors could also be considered the rightsholders to the films in the AQSSHF.

While ACP has been able to organize international screenings of the films that they have digital restored, Longo and others involved have struggled to make those films more widely available, let alone monetize those restorations in order to fund future projects. In certain cases, rightsholders have allowed their work to be restored but have objected to the ACP or the AQSHF profiting financially by providing access to the restored versions.²⁷ While the ACP has consulted with Albanian and American copyright specialists, it has thus far been unable to determine definitively whether these individuals own the rights to the films in the AQSHF. Because of the uncertain rights status of the films, as well as reoccurring changes to Albanian copyright law, even the Ministry of Culture is currently unable to monetize or provide widespread access to Kinostudio films.²⁸ According to Longo, these rights-related issues are not unique to Albania, but are widespread problems faced by national archives throughout the Balkan region seeking to make the films in their collections accessible to the public.²⁹

Conclusion

While major national film archives often prioritize preservation over access, this approach is not always realistic for smaller nations with fewer resources at their disposal. Furthermore, the

²⁵ Interview with Regina Longo, April 5 2020.

²⁶ “Intellectual Property in Albania,” hg.org, accessed May 25, 2020, <https://www.hg.org/legal-articles/intellectual-property-in-albania-31979>

²⁷ Interview with Regina Longo, April 5 2020.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

priorities of national films archives will always be informed by the history of their respective nations and their film industries. The case of the AQSHF and the work of the ACP demonstrate the ways that access often precedes preservation for marginalized film cultures. However, despite their best efforts, providing access to the films in the AQSHF remains an ongoing struggle for the ACP, and other initiatives like it in the Balkan region.

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