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'Danmark på film': Film Archives and a New Sense of Cultural Memory

RESUMÉ

Denne artikel undersøger, i hvilket omfang og på hvilke måder et filmarkiv er i stand til at opbygge en kulturel hukommelse ved nøje at undersøge projektet *Danmark på film* (indledt af det Danske Filminstitut). Selvom arkiver har et ry for at være passive indsamlere, så præsenterer *Danmark på film* progressive ideer til at skabe dynamisk samspil mellem filmarkivets materiale og offentligheden. Der vil blive argumenteret for, at gennem brug af digitalisering sikrer *Danmark på film* bevarelse og fremvisning, skaber en dialog på tværs af generationer og samtidig omdefinerer 'kulturel hukommelse' ved at skifte fokus til en nations hverdag.

ABSTRACT

This article explores to what extent and in what ways a film archive is capable of building a cultural memory by closely examining the project *Danmark på film* (initiated by the Danish Film Institute). While archives tend to have a reputation as passive collectors, *Danmark på film* presents progressive ideas to create a dynamic interplay between a film archive's material and the public. It will be argued that, by using digitization, *Danmark på film* secures preservation and display, creates a cross-generational dialogue, and redefines 'cultural memory' by shifting focus to the everyday life of a nation.

EMNEORD

Filmarkiv, kulturel hukommelse, Det Danske Filminstitut, digitalisering, interaktivitet

KEYWORDS

Film Archive, cultural memory, Danish Film Institute, digitization, interactivity

Introduction

Film archives are increasingly falling into oblivion for a variety of reasons. As we experience significant technological change, our media consumption is moving towards the digital and away from physical film. Films are available everywhere and at any time, and are no longer bound to movie theatres. Furthermore, we are now dealing with a “globalised media market” (McChesney 2003, 28), which causes an increased merging of national film landscapes and no longer limits audiences to their national film heritage. As Ib Bondebjerg states, “we are probably today encountering more information, news, images and stories from outside our normal local-national community” (2016, 2). What does this mean for the existence of film archives? How does this change the definition of a country’s film heritage? If we look across literature on the role and impact of film archives in recent years, it seems as though archives have lost their engagement with the public and the influence on the country’s cultural memory. Lynn Spigel (2005) and Caroline Frick (2009) discuss archives as passive entities that merely collect material without any contact with the viewer. Furthermore, one can ascertain the criticism that archives tend to only brand certain films as so-called ‘cultural heritage’, while others that might not have a status of art or auteur cinema remain unnoticed.

The project *Danmark på film* initiated by the Danish Film Institute (DFI) in 2015 challenges many of these issues and gives new inspiration for an archive’s engagement with the public. Funded by the Denmark’s Ministry of Culture, the project revives early archival material of the DFI through digitization and display on an online platform (www.danmarkpaafilm.dk). Divided into geographical and thematic categories, users can view and engage with the material through comment functions. In so doing, it promotes interactivity with the archive and its material as well as a cross-generational communication with Denmark’s history.

This paper engages with the question of how and to what extent the project *Danmark på film* and the DFI as an institution are capable of building a cultural memory for Denmark. A close case study and an interview with project manager Lisbeth Richter Larsen form the basis for examining this question. To extend the analysis on a theoretical level, I draw upon concepts from José van Dijck, Aleida Assmann, and Astrid Erll on cultural memory, linking them with studies of the archival practice. I argue that, through its activity and

interactivity with the public, *Danmark på film* not only contributes to building cultural memory but in fact creates a new means by which film can act as our memory: one that is not exclusively in the hands of the institution but also shaped by the audience themselves. I furthermore discuss how the project gives a new meaning to the term 'cultural heritage' by removing the focus from high art to the everyday life of the nation.

Concepts & Theories

Cultural Memory

Cultural memory, or collective memory, is a term that was first introduced by French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s. Since then, it has developed into a research area that is fundamentally interdisciplinary and incorporates fields such as history, sociology, neuroscience and philosophy. In her introduction to *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, Astrid Erll speaks of a "stimulating dialogue" (2010, 2) initiated by studies of cultural memory, one that can only work if it is based on many different academic perspectives and if it crosses intellectual and linguistic boundaries between those fields. She broadly describes it as the "interplay of past and present in a socio-cultural context" (2010, 2). Key to this interplay are cultural narratives, which are produced by either individuals or institutions and which we use to make sense of our history. She divides the term 'memory' into two categories. The first is biological memory, which refers to the schemata that help us – the participants of a cultural context – remember our past (2010, 5). The second is of more symbolic nature. Media, institutions, and practices create and construct cultural memory but are as selective and subjective in their choices as is the human brain.

José van Dijck (2007) provides us with a comprehensive illumination of cultural memory in her book *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*. Van Dijck makes an initial distinction between "personal cultural memory" and "collective cultural memory" (2007, 1-27). She describes personal cultural memory as something that is "central to constructing a sense of a continuity between ourselves and others" (2007, 3), including notions of identity, relationships, time and the material dimension of our being. Van Dijck

contrasts this aspect with collective cultural memory: a form of memory that is filtered through cultural conventions and frameworks, a shared form of memory through which people are linked with one another. It is essentially a result of the "individual's and other's mutual, interdependent relationship" (2007, 14). On the basis of this comparison, she then establishes the concept of "mediated memories", which she defines as "the activities and objects we produce and appropriate by means of media technologies, for creating and re-creating a sense of past, present, and future of ourselves in relation to others" (2007, 21). It is those objects that we find, for example, in film archives. These will become particularly interesting in the discussion of memory and archives, as they hold significant potential for continuing remembrance of national history.

The German historian Aleida Assmann adds another point of importance, namely that cultural memory encompasses past, present, and future as well as the generations belonging to each entity. As she puts it, "Cultural memory creates a framework for communication across the abyss of time" (2010, 97). This framework, however, works on a dialectical basis. She does not see collective memory as the sum of all personal memories but instead describes them as anchors that connect the self and others. She furthermore distinguishes between actively circulated memory (canon) and passively stored memory (archive), which ties into the next section to be discussed in this paper.

The Archive

Assmann creates an inherent connection between the archive and cultural memory in her discussion of cultural remembering and forgetting (2010, 98). Within the three core areas of memory that she constitutes (national history – art – religion), the archive serves two functions: on the one hand "the presentation of a narrow selection of sacred texts, artistic masterpieces or historic key events in a timeless framework" and on the other the "storing of documents and artefacts of the past" (2010, 101). In this sense, the archive becomes the basis for what we remember of the present in the future. Furthermore, Assmann (2010) contrasts the archive with what she calls "canon", which signifies the active memory of a society, that which is visibly circulating in people's minds. What is forgotten is stored in the archive.

Significantly, then, she considers archives as a passive dimension of memory since they store “information that is no longer of use” (2010, 103). This means that the content of the archive keeps balancing on the edge of forgetting and remembering, dependent on the public sphere to secure an active memory of what the archive provides. Assmann draws upon the notion of passivity, which is also mentioned by Lynn Spigel and Ray Edmonson as a persistent feature of archives: places where “old material is kept” (Edmonson 1995, 246). Spigel (2005, 67-9) puts it even more starkly,

no matter what archivists or museologists say, [media scholars and archivists] are still just collectors ... hoping to convince you that despite the archive’s search for reason, the reason things are saved are never as reasonable as they appear.

Caroline Frick (2009) in turn highlights the professionalization of archives and their role of active manufacturing, production, and distribution of filmic heritage. She sees them as not merely user driven and service providing but as a branch of the media industry itself. She considers them to be institutions that produce and distribute filmic heritage just as much as, for example, cinemas do. As a result, the aim – and simultaneously struggle – to create access for the public is central to their existence. However, she also points out that this institutionalization leads to a branding of specific moving image material as “heritage” around the world (Frick 2009, 40), which evokes an argument as to who is in charge of this decision as well as what kind of films are selected. Are they the so-called ‘filmic masterpieces’? Films made by renowned directors? Films with the highest viewership?

In brief, then, one can say that an archive integrates the normative ideals of securing remembrance of, in this case, Denmark’s film and national history as well as comprises a new set of historic pieces. Here, the archive provides a structural selection of what is to be remembered and considered of historic importance. The work of this body, however, struggles with pressures of transcending the image of “noble preservers” (Frick 2009, 35).

Digitization of archival material and heritage

As scholars – whether with hope or skepticism – stress across various fields, it is essential to include digitization in the discussion of archival practice since

this is where the future of archives lies. Assmann (2010, 97) explicitly connects memory and the internet, observing that the internet has a similar quality as our memory since it can store occasions and events as well as bring people together across space. In a report for the European Commission, Nicola Mazzanti (2011, 20) remarks that “over the past two decades cinema moved progressively to the complete digitization of its production, post-production and distribution”. Film archives too cannot escape this change, given what Mazzanti (2011, 59) regards as the unprecedented levels of accessibility offered by digital technologies.

However, digitized media and memory are frequently seen as antagonistic realms. Both Assmann and Thomas C. Christensen are hesitant about the digitization of archives and influence of media on collective memory. Assmann regards as problematic the way in which the media supposedly affect the memory discourse and make us to passively remembering individuals in society. Without providing a precise definition of ‘heritage’, Christensen (2013, 51) too highlights preservation as a prerequisite for providing access to film and cinema heritage as an “expression of history, culture and art”. Although digitization might bring about new opportunities to make films available to non-archival users and to increase the number of films that are made available, Christensen (2013, 52) perceives numerous gaps regarding “in which and under what conditions film will remain available”. A search for new concepts and business models is thus of great importance.

Van Dijck (2007) contradicts this view by seeing digital media and memory not as two separate entities but instead as two things mutually influencing each other. She understands digital technologies as reinventing rather than replacing our former (analogue) forms of remembering. In fact, she understands the two as a “continuously evolving life-project” (Van Dijck 2007, 13) to define the self in a wider context. Martin Koerber (2013, 43) embraces the digital domain in a more practical manner. He feels that to solve challenges of audio-visual archiving, we must go “in one direction, and one direction only: digital”. However, archivists should not forget the knowledge they learned before the digital era (handling of analogue reels, knowing about obsolete sound and image formats, etc.) since such knowledge will remain necessary (Koerber 2013, 44).

Methods

This paper follows a case study method alongside interview-based research, given that, as Yin (2009) argues, the case study method is appropriate when considering the questions of 'how' and 'why'. Since this paper focuses on the extent to which *Danmark på film* subverts common scholarly discussions of film archives and cultural memory and the significance this discussion has, this research method has been deemed appropriate for this paper. More specifically, this paper follows a qualitative case study method with an interview as the primary data collection source. As the homepage of *Danmark på film* only offers a limited amount of information on the project, it has been deemed essential to interview Lisbeth Richter Larsen (initiator, project manager, and editor of *Danmark på film*) on the background to, intentions of, and responses to the project. It was particularly important for me to determine how to place *Danmark på film* in the research context of cultural memory and archival practice as well as to have the chance of a face-to-face conversation about personal experiences with and goals of the project. This gave me the opportunity to align with Holstein and Gubrium (1997), who state that interview data can be analyzed to show the dynamic interrelatedness of the 'whats' and the 'hows.'

This method faces limitations with regard to objectivity and diversity of perspectives. Through speaking to Lisbeth Richter Larsen, my data is focused on the perspective of the archive and lacks an independent view of the project's audience. Although we did discuss weaknesses and points for improving the project, this angle as well as the scope for further engagement needs to be considered when reading this paper.

Analysis

Activity: the DFIDFI and its archival material

The case study including the interview with Lisbeth Richter Larsen shows that the *Danmark på film* project is an example of an active archive in which 'old material' is not only 'kept' (Edmonson, 1995) but also browsed, edited, and made available to the public. As mentioned in the introduction, the project came into existence through the proposal to digitize the archive, for which the DFI received funding from the Ministry of Culture. While

archivists were looking through the material in the initial phase of the project, it soon developed into the idea to select film material that has not been or cannot be categorized and organize it into a collection of geographic and thematic categories. The time period between 1900 and 1965 was chosen since the funding provided no money for clearing rights, meaning that the films had to be material for which copyright had expired or did not apply (e.g. unknown material). Lisbeth explained the process to me in this manner: During their daily work, archivists come across film canisters that are either unlabeled or for which the director is unknown. They then pass these on to Lisbeth, who organizes the material in a digital database. The material is digitized by a company in the Netherlands and returned to Lisbeth, who then watches the material for the first time. If she decides to include it in the project, descriptions are created and then entered into the website in Norway.

Looking at this process, we find Assmann's assertions mirrored in *Danmark på film*. The project works with "documents and artefacts of the past" (Assmann 2010, 101) that are initially stored but, instead of merely being kept, are subsequently re-stored and made visible through the digitization process. The project complies with what Martin Koerber envisages for archives of the future: moving with the digital era and at the same time maintaining former archival skills and practices, such as handling analogue originals. In contrast to Assmann's further assumption (that archival material is on the brink of being forgotten), this particular section of the DFI archive represents a break with existing practices, as the material is used in a new and progressive way. It is in fact a dual mediatization that is at work here, as events of the past have first been captured on analogue film reel and are then placed in a new context by the archive today. In so doing, the archive not just triggers a process of recalling but establishes a topological relevance, as *Danmark på film* manages to "locate and identify pieces of culture" (van Dijck 2007, 50).

How the individual comes into play in this constellation will be discussed in more detail in the next subsection. In brief, however, the *Danmark på film* project actively bridges the two dimensions of film archiving (storing and presenting) by moving into the "one direction" of the digital proposed by Koerber (2013, 43).

Interactivity: the user aspect of Danmark på film

This subsection explores the opportunities offered by this digitization process. A crucial feature of *Danmark på film* is the active involvement of the public and the searching for a dialogue between archive and audience. Regarding this, Lisbeth said that her team intentionally added the user aspect, which was not originally planned for inclusion. The web takes on a central role, representing the meeting point between the archive and the audience. Here, visitors can either use the virtual map to find films that have been allocated to a certain region or specific place or can browse the database for themes. A great advantage of the geographical dimension, Lisbeth says, is that “People can easily find themselves”. The website further emphasizes this with its main headline: “Find din by på kortet” (“Find your town on the map”). This shows how the web facilitates openness to the public space and an invitation to participate in the project. In order to engage with a younger audience, the Facebook social media platform has also been used as a marketing tool. This hints at a direct incorporation of and relationship between the viewer and the archival material. We can thus see that the mediated memories that the archive restored “are not static objects or repositories but dynamic relationships” (van Dijck 2007, 21). *Danmark på film*’s notion of “finding oneself” within the collected material is precisely the instance in which the individual mind and collective culture meet (van Dijck 2007, 22).

Besides merely viewing the films, people can interact with and comment on the films. Here, the merits of Facebook as a platform for exchanging ideas and bringing producer and audience closer become obvious. Receiving between 5 and 10 messages per week as well as an even greater number of specific comments on the website, Lisbeth has observed a vibrant conversation in which people respond enthusiastically, full of nostalgia, or have been able to place unknown material in a certain village or even recognize people in the films. Some of these responses also hinted at the educational and therapeutic aspect of the project. Lisbeth has been approached by schools that wished to use the material in class. Nurses from care homes have also been interested in using the material for dementia patients in order to possibly reawaken their memory of the past. Here, the film clips quite literally act as “material triggers for future recall” (van Dijck 2007, 39). The responses are thus not only a simple tool for receiving feedback but lead to a dynamic interactivity in which

both sides benefit from each other: The audience is stimulated for a conversation on a collective cultural level or personal memory and is educated on certain aspects of Denmark's history, while the archive receives information that it would not otherwise be able to acquire.

A further effect of this kind of interactivity facilitated by the internet is that geographically remote or even neglected places are given new significance. As Lisbeth explained, Denmark has difficulties incorporating communities that are distant from town centers. As more and more people move to the city, the periphery is moving increasingly out of sight and struggles to stay alive. A project like this one, however, includes any region, whether urban or rural. "The project makes everyone important," Lisbeth states. As a result, the project is inclusive in the sense that every region is given voice and visibility.

Above, I have sketched out the efforts of the archive to incorporate an audience into the process of archiving national film heritage. Moving away from that particular perspective, one can surely ask why we should want an audience to engage with archival material in the first place. The reasons go to the heart of how cultural memory functions: While an archive provides material, it needs dialogue with the audience to actually preserve it in people's minds and create a consciousness for what should be remembered about a country's history. An archive can offer only so much, while the audience itself is responsible for actual engagement with the material. On the one hand, this follows Assmann's and van Dijck's assertions that the individual needs the wider context of the culture to make sense of himself or herself. On the other hand, the true benefit of the digitized material in the archive depends heavily on the precise degree of engagement.

To briefly summarize, *Danmark på film* shows how positively digitization and the web can be used for preserving and presenting archival material. It fills the gaps that Koerber has detected in the digitization process and in so doing ties into the distribution aspect Frick considers so important for archives. We can thus see how *Danmark på film* extends the arguments of Assmann, Spigel, and Edmonson. Within this project, the archive is no longer a place "where old material is kept" (Edmonson 1995, 246), nor is it "just [a] collector" (Spigel 2005, 67). It has in fact become a professionalized body. The institutional role of the DFI thus stands out within this project: It is able to influence Danish

society at a macro-social level that incorporates education and the formation of cultural memory. The latter will be the subject of the following subsection.

Danmark på film and cultural memory

Having analysed how *Danmark på film* is organized, this subsection will take a closer look at the content of the material and explore how its production and distribution works towards building a cultural memory for Denmark.

First, the choosing and editing process frames the material within a new context. The focus is, as Lisbeth said, Denmark's everyday life. The categories under which you can find films besides the map are, for example, "Sommer i Danmark" ("Summer in Denmark"), "Dans på kryds og tværs" ("Dancing Back and Forth"), "Danmark anno 1915" ("Denmark in the year 1915"), or befitting the season "Nu' det jul igen" ("Walking in a Winter Wonderland"). Commenting upon the reasons for and effects of this, Lisbeth said that quite often, "we hit the local pride" in people but also that the project gives "insight into a part of history we don't know much about". Everyday life is often lost in historical accounts even though it is this to which people can relate the most. In this respect, film is a unique means of capturing exactly this everyday notion of our life. When you watch clips from the early 20th century, the people being filmed often look straight into the camera or even gather around it, as if the filming were a major event. As Lisbeth describes it, "You can really feel people when you watch this". This means you actually get an impression that approaches the real and that fictional or 'heritage' film such as art and auteur cinema only offers to a limited extent. As a result, the project both stimulates the biological memory of a country's past, as explained by Assmann, and creates a new form of memory by selecting and storing aspects of the past that might have fallen into oblivion outside the canon. Those people who have lived in those times are reminded of the past and potentially encouraged to remember things that might have otherwise been forgotten, while younger people who are distant from these years learn about a part of their history that they have never experienced.

Finally, and rather uniquely for an archive, Denmark's cultural memory is shaped not only by the project itself but also by the user who is actively involved in the project. Through the interactivity with schools and nursing homes that work with the material, these film clips are carried beyond the

website and beyond the DFI: They open up dialogues between the public and the archive as well as between generations. Through this decision to involve the public, the films (and embodied in them, Denmark's history) are carried further and deeper than the DFI could have achieved on its own.

If we relate this to Erlil's explanations of cultural memory, we can see how the "interplay between past and present" becomes visible in *Danmark på film*. It is literally people's life of the past that is restored and revived. As Lisbeth aptly summarizes, "The past becomes very present". What is more, the past not only becomes present but in fact becomes alive through the project's user aspect and people's engagement with the material. Assmann's (2010, 97) assumption that cultural memory creates a framework for communication across time can thus be understood in a literal sense when looking at *Danmark på film*: Using what the DFI as an institution provides through the project, people are engaged in an active dialogue about their past and how they relate to it. Most significantly, *Danmark på film* sits exactly at the nexus of personal memory and collective memory and offers a meeting place that tends to be absent from archives today. Following van Dijck (2007, 22), the project is able to place the "personal shoebox items" (that is, the captured everyday moments of the past) in a wider context and transform them into culturally relevant objects. In brief, we can see how the project bridges archival practice and cultural memory, in an interactive sense that is targeted inclusively at the entirety of Denmark.

Points for development

There are a few points at which the project encounters limitations and at which the work regarding Denmark's cultural memory could have been even more significant. First, the clips that are shown are merely from the DFI's archive. There is no 'collecting' in the sense of acquiring material from other institutions and organizations. Lisbeth would have liked to collaborate with local archives, as this would have made the choice of films even more representative of Denmark as a whole. It would furthermore have secured a closer connection to local, possibly even remote, archives and given them the opportunity to become involved in a larger collaboration with institutions possessing a greater reputation. This would have strengthened the interactivity with both organizations and individual audiences, as more material could have been collected and distributed. However, a limited

budget and lack of resources make it impossible to establish this connection for the time being.

The project would have been further enhanced by a possibility for people to add clips themselves. For remote regions, filmic material might be stored not in archives but with families themselves and thereby lack the opportunity to be seen. A call for submission of clips to the DFI might have heightened awareness of Denmark's film archive, its interactivity with the population, and contributed to Denmark's cultural memory in a more inclusive manner, but it would also have created a wider, less centralized collection of material. Lisbeth would like to tackle such a project expansion and admits: "In a better world, we'd be able to involve everyone". But again, a larger budget and more employees would have been necessary to make this happen.

Conclusion

The project *Danmark på film* offers many fresh thoughts for how film archives can influence and actively build a country's cultural memory. *Danmark på film* achieves this through a process that contradicts many widespread notions of archives as passive collectors and places for forgotten material. Through active engagement with its early archival material, it collects a continually growing selection of documentary clips of life in Denmark from 1900-1965 and displays them on an online platform. What emerges from this is a cultural memory shaped by constant expansion and by interactivity with personal memories. This cultural memory focuses on Denmark's everyday life rather than on acclaimed filmic masterpieces. Most importantly, however, the project builds up a cultural memory that encompasses Denmark's past and present and creates a platform for communicating Denmark's history and the memories that relate to it.

Although the project still has potential to for further development (in terms of outreach to local archives and improved interactivity), it nevertheless produces a wide array of new perspectives on the future of the archival practice, perspectives that go beyond my original question concerning cultural memory. The interview with Lisbeth Richter Larsen showed that the project is a notable example of how to successfully utilize digitization in a manner that transcends merely storing archival material. By using the material to reach out to a wider audience and build a cultural collective

memory, *Danmark på film* could tie into the new business models for which Thomas C. Christensen so urgently calls. The project incorporates a dynamic activity into the DFI's early archival material and uses this for numerous purposes. On the one hand, the project secures the preservation of archival material in the digital era while on the other hand creating a vibrant interactivity between the audience and the material. This is an interactivity that makes people aware of DFI and its projects, that stimulates dialogue between generations and has educational and historical significance within Denmark's population.

Finally, the project defines film heritage in a new sense. *Danmark på film* moves away from so-called filmic masterpieces by nationally acclaimed directors and instead declares 'film heritage' to be something relating to the everyday life of a region or an entire country. In this case, it is the personal cultural memory of individuals that constitutes what is remembered by the collectivity of a nation.

Forward-looking projects such as *Danmark på film* are thus of great institutional influence and importance. Support for such projects from both consumers and funding bodies would thus be of enormous help for securing the preservation of both the archives and the country's film heritage.

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