

short subject

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Remarks on a failed film archival project

ABSTRACT

This brief article assesses an ongoing infrastructural research project focusing on filmarkivet.se, a website devoted to historical Swedish non-fiction film. As a collaboration between film researchers and film heritage institutions, the project has to date failed to overcome conflicting archival interests. Film scholars in general need open online archives and contextual resources, while some heritage institutions seek to give access solely to a curated filmic past. While cooperation between the heritage sector and scholars is regularly envisioned as being mutually beneficial, it also faces difficulties that need to be addressed and overcome.

In 2012 the second largest funding agency for humanistic research in Sweden, Riksbankens jubileumsfond, decided to fund an infrastructural project with the purpose of expanding the site filmarkivet.se – a joint venture between the Swedish Film Institute and the National Library of Sweden, mainly devoted to historical non-fiction film. Inspiration came from international portals and web projects such as the European Film Gateway and the Media Historical Digital Library – in terms of making contextual material available – or the ways in which the Prelinger Archives have included public reviews and comments online. The main idea was

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to develop filmarkivet.se in a similar manner, according to four parallel work packages: cataloguing, coding, contextualization and communication. Project priorities were to add new cinematic categories and contextual material to the site, as well as to implement updated web-based functionalities with a distinct user perspective.

However, after more than two and a half years, no new features have been added to filmarkivet.se, no new research functionalities, user interaction, contextual material, or ways to comment and communicate – not even the edited (and CC-licensed) research volume that formed the basis of the project, *Skosmörja eller arkivdokument?!* 'Shoeshine or Archival Document?' (Jönsson and Snickars, 2012).

Here I would like to assess what general insights film and media scholars can draw from the difficulties the project has faced. Primarily, I find that radically different policies and approaches as to the mission and purpose of audio-visual heritage institutions have led to academic perspectives being disregarded. Cooperation between the heritage sector and humanistic scholars is regularly envisioned as beneficial to all parties involved, but in this particular project these benefits have yet to materialize.

INCOMPATIBLE FILM HERITAGE

The National Library of Sweden is a government agency under the auspices of the Department of Education and Research. The library's task is 'to collect, describe, safeguard and make accessible' all materials printed in Sweden, as well as all radio, television, film and music distributed in Sweden, primarily for research and for the preservation of the nation's cultural heritage (National Library of Sweden 2015). The Swedish Film Institute also has a responsibility for

the nation's film heritage; the mission is 'to collect, catalogue, preserve and give access to Sweden's film heritage', for example via screenings at the Cinemateque (2015). The focus of the Film Institute's outreach activities is not research, but rather popular education understood in a broad sense, although digital copies of films in its collection are available for research at the National Library. In addition, Swedish Television has a substantial film archive with copies available for research. (Since the archive was established to facilitate television programmes and not for research, academics cannot enter Swedish Television's archival premises.)

Different institutional aims, objectives and assignments regulating national film heritage have led to conflicting archival preferences, especially regarding access. In addition, for the infrastructural research project focusing on filmarkivet.se, archival policies and preferences have proven difficult to combine with research interests. Generally speaking, film scholars prefer to work with large, open online film collections and related contextual media-historical resources. The Swedish Film Institute, however, seeks to give access to a curated filmic past (Jönsson 2014), under the aegis of 'large-scale high-quality digitization' based on the premise that 'the digitization of heritage films has the potential of providing access on an unprecedented scale, as new platforms have emerged to facilitate access and the fact that digital copies are not subject to the same wear and tear as analogue film elements' (Wengström 2013).

Naturally, considerations other than research must influence the Swedish Film Institute's decisions. The rationale envisions digitization as a way to continue screening old films in 4K digitized cinemas and as a method for long-term preservation.

Nevertheless, to provide access to film heritage one needs to mass-digitize and to alter the way archival collections are handled. The allocation of archival resources is both an organizational and a monetary question, and these resources are always constrained. If providing access to researchers is a priority, the primary focus cannot be on large-scale, high-quality digitization, since this would tie up major resources for a long time. (Libraries in general learned a similar lesson in relation to Google's book scan project, initiated more than a decade ago.) Opposing views of what constitutes access have thus been one of the issues to resolve in this infrastructural project.

Another problematic aspect from a research perspective concerns the selection of films to be digitized. Traditionally, films have been chosen according to internal criteria (with a special focus on auteurs), with little input from academic film historians. In short, the focus of the Film Institute's archival activities has never been film historical research (nor is it driven by such criteria), and it has instead become quite conservative, since research perspectives have been consistently neglected.

A related issue regards one of the other aims of the infrastructural project, namely, to add relevant contextual film historical sources such as film programmes, old film periodicals or books published by Swedish film pioneers. The focus at *filmarkivet.se* has been on films per se, and not on other empirical sources. Although these are often of great interest to film scholars, to date the Film Institute has not perceived them as sufficiently relevant, either from an institutional perspective or for general users. The approach suggested by the Film Institute was to add contextual material with an explicit connection to particular films. Prioritizing selected films rather than

research in general could further contribute to the popular online success of *filmarkivet.se*, but would do little to further research interests.

Research on new digital methods is a further challenge for archives. As the amount of digitized material within the heritage domain increases, providing various open source tools as well as methods to analyse such materials becomes, I would argue, an institutional necessity for archives. In digitized form films are also binary resources; as constituent parts of an institution's digital repository they are consequently subject to analysis in their own right. Within the digital humanities, heritage data are, for example, analysed in different ways, whether in the form of topic modelling, pattern recognition, cultural analytics, distant reading or other usages of algorithms that uncover hidden thematic structure in digitized collections. While today's digital methods promise to reconceptualize film history, the application of such digital methods and tools for audio-visual data is still in dire need of discussion. *Filmarkivet.se* could, at least partly, be used to work with different methods in order to analyse the content at hand as data. So far, the need for such new research perspectives has not been acknowledged from an institutional stance.

Two further remarks can be made with a special emphasis on filmic heritage and digitization. First, web-based access to film heritage involves media transfer. All digitization means converting old and analogue films to audio-visual files, altering the original 35 or 16mm prints and resulting in lossy compression and streaming formats. Digitization thus *always* means archival distortion. For this reason it has never been preferred by film archives, although some international organizations, such as the European Commission's Film Heritage Group, have both a positive

and a nuanced approach towards digitization.

Second, the web is essentially ephemeral, unstable and thus unreliable. Consequently, from an archival perspective the web cannot be trusted, with filmic content running the apparent risk of, for example, 'link rot' (dead ends and error messages) or 'content drift' (with material on the move, appearing elsewhere). With films in digital formats and with differences between computational media rapidly fading, the film archival specificity of moving images, as well as the particular cultural value of film archives, needs to be reformulated.

My overall experience so far is that it is difficult to blend the archival and web-presentational perspectives discussed above. In short, either a heritage institution follows the archival principle of mass-digitizing material, presenting it online in the form of an open database, or it adheres to the principle of selecting certain films, presenting a hand-picked, high-quality and curated version of film history. These two conflicting archival missions appear incompatible, and are the main reason why the infrastructural film project so far has not been successful.

CODA

In early 2015, and with permission from the funding agency, I initiated the construction of a beta version of a specific 'research tab': *filmarkivforskning.se* – literally translated as 'film archival research'. At this point, since only Film Institute staff may access the back end of the site *filmarkivet.se* and its content management system, a separate site in WordPress was created in order to follow the project plan (and perhaps update the original site further on). *Filmarkivforskning.se* is today a fully operational site aimed at film historical research. It is a sort of sister site to *filmarkivet.se*, with tabs

such as 'film library' (scanned books), thousands of film programmes, and outlines of new digital methods, themes and publications. More material and film historical content will be added and everything is downloadable. An English version is currently being built. Please take a look!

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