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*Global Audiovisual Archiving: Seventh Eye International
Conference (review)*

Marek Jancovic

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Conference



Global Audiovisual Archiving: Seventh Eye International Conference

MAY 29–31, 2022, AMSTERDAM,
THE NETHERLANDS

Marek Jancovic

The opening and closing words of the first day of the seventh Eye International Conference (May 29–31, 2022, Amsterdam, the Netherlands) could stand in as a good outline not only of the whole event but also of the internal conflict with which the entire field of audiovisual preservation, as a global undertaking, is grappling. Following a welcome by Eye Film-museum’s Chief Curator Giovanna Fossati, the title of the very first panel—“It’s Almost Too Late!”—emphatically communicated the sense of dread, panic, and urgency that most of us concerned with audiovisual heritage experience in the face of rapidly deteriorating analog and digital carriers and multiplying environmental and political crises. And yet, Judith Opoku-Boateng concluded the last panel of the day with the words “but all is not lost.” It’s almost too late—but all is not lost. This ambiva-

lent but ultimately hopeful stance perfectly encapsulates the atmosphere at the conference.

Officially a three-day event subtitled “Global Audiovisual Archiving: Exchange of Knowledge and Practices,” the conference was organized by the Eye Filmmuseum in collaboration with the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA), the University of Amsterdam, and the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis. It took place in the cinema auditorium at Eye’s gracious building on Amsterdam’s northern waterfront and was flanked by additional days of screenings and poster presentations. The event brought together a truly diverse set of presentations and an audience from all corners of the world to discuss the challenges and global disparities in audiovisual preservation in all their complex political, technological, geographical, social, and historical facets. The audience was treated to fascinating photographic and videographic material, and the program was punctuated with emotionally impactful film screenings.

In many ways, this year’s Eye conference was a model example of what a post-Covid-19 forum for practitioners, artists, and academics could look like. It was a delight to convene with

colleagues and to finally catch up with old and new friends in person. It was equally gratifying to see the potential of online conferencing utilized so well, with a balanced presence of geographically remote presenters who seamlessly joined the discussions in real time as well as with prerecorded contributions.

And yet the hybrid format in itself subtly underscored the lopsided material realities of global technological infrastructure. While the conference was impeccably executed and streamed with an elaborate multicamera setup, some of the presentations occasionally got stuck because of slow hardware and network delays in places like Ghana and Tunisia. Another telling moment occurred during one of the discussions, when Rebecca Ohene-Asah from the National Film and Television Institute in Ghana, presenting on-site in Amsterdam, realized that she had never met Samuel Benagr (University of Ghana, joining virtually), despite both of them working in the same country on the same questions of national video culture and its preservation. Again, this accentuates the paradoxical position of venues like this: they carry a critical and necessary function in network building and enabling conversations, but in so doing, they also reinforce the status of established institutions in the “Global North” as ineluctable mediators of knowledge. Having said that, our field is clearly better off with this conference than it would be without. It may not be “best practice,” but it is “good practice”—a refrain that echoed across many of the debates and presentations that took place.

Summaries of all the numerous, rich panels can be found in the conference program.¹ I shall try to inventory some of the subtending and overarching points raised in the presentations, roundtable discussions, and audience debates. I will first do so by means of a list that will initially appear very bleak. Some of the issues are well trodden and familiar but continue to worsen:

Much global audiovisual material has been irrevocably lost and continues decaying, sometimes due to intentional indifference or willed governmental forgetting.

Owing to political and/or financial neglect

and infrastructural and/or staffing difficulties, many institutions lack even basic projection equipment, let alone appropriate tools for preserving or digitizing analog formats.

Old equipment is obsolete, and new equipment is expensive. This is exacerbated when rare tools, machines, or spare parts have to be imported across borders, especially from North to South.

National and international funding structures are set up antagonistically. Archives must compete for meager resources rather than collectively addressing shared concerns.

Under the guise of altruism, offers to digitize materials from Western/Northern companies are often paid for with loss of intellectual rights or the withdrawal of heritage from their local and regional contexts. (Commercial) archives in rich countries continue monetizing and profiting from the cultural memory of formerly colonized populations.

Despite public commitments and individual initiatives, restitution of looted heritage is stalling. Large national museums are at times refusing to repatriate—and rematriate—objects to their rightful custodians.

To get any preservation work done at all, some archivists tactically avoid working with politically delicate or controversial material for fear of souring already brittle relationships with national governments.

Contrarily, archivists are sometimes forced to refuse government funding because it is the only way to maintain an archive’s social legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

Bureaucratic vagaries, visa restrictions, and the whims of embassies and other organs that regulate travel are obstructing international exchange and attendance at trainings and conferences.

Regulatory red tape—often a vestige of colonial institutional structures—hinders day-to-day work. Simple acts

of solidarity, such as sending an unused machine to a partner archive, can be hampered by arcane rules.

Environmental and infrastructural instabilities, such as power outages or poor cooling systems, continue to make preservation work more difficult than it should be.

In some regions of the world, the low cultural status of archiving has resulted in a lack of professionalism and a passive attitude among archivists.

There simply is not enough money.

However, another ongoing theme was that even though these daunting challenges currently define the global audiovisual archives field, all is not lost.

Despite this grim outlook, there are genuine reasons to stay hopeful, and real progress is being made. International training programs *are* working. Internships, traineeships, and mentorships *are* working. Knowledge and skill exchange *is* happening. Machines do successfully make their way to archives where they are needed, and they are being operated by a new generation of knowledgeable experts. Many endangered records are ending up in safe hands and are being cataloged and made accessible. New cinemas—*real* cinemas—are being founded, and they occasionally turn into “accidental” archives (to borrow Didi Cheeka’s expression). Those archives are succeeding in mobilizing audiences and volunteers, as we heard in the panel about the Cimatheque Cairo. Despite introducing their own administrative challenges, regulatory reforms have enabled some film archives, for example, in Thailand, to mature into healthy, functioning organizations.

We have seen ample proof that communities and individuals do care about historical audiovisual material. Artists, filmmakers, researchers, and students are willing and able to help out and can be fruitfully included in assessment, cataloging, preservation, or digitization efforts. Problems are never-ending, but workable solutions are being developed. Those solutions may not always conform to ways of doing sanctioned by guidelines and recommendations issued by AMIA, the International Federation of Film Archives, or the International

Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives. But they work. And that’s the point.

In fact, if I had to pin down one message that resonated the strongest throughout the entire event, it would be this: we need to change how we think and speak of “global” audiovisual archiving. First, we need new concepts to replace the monikers “Global North” and “Global South,” which were problematized repeatedly and historicized by Pedro Félix and Ilse Assmann. These labels are imprecise and do not map onto actual archival geographies of power. Materials in the North are not necessarily receiving better care, nor are they necessarily cataloged or stored properly.

Second, we need to reframe partnerships between well-funded and underserved archives. There is a tendency to interpret them in terms like “help” and “support,” which imply unidirectional flows of resources or services from a benefactor to a beneficiary—usually from North to South, from national to Indigenous, from established to informal. Again, such language does not reflect the reality of such relationships and is, in fact, often indicative of what multiple presenters have called “toxic care”—practices that perpetuate patronizing or colonial hierarchies. The debates make clear that exchanges between archives always benefit both parties. Even well-trained archivists gain new knowledge from the adaptation to new circumstances; they benefit from the training and accumulate social capital around the “more experienced” institution’s reputation and esteem.

Third, we need to take seriously the archival expertise and practices developed outside the traditional centers of knowledge. Archives all around the world possess skills and experience that institutions in Europe and North America do not. They are experts in dealing with very degraded material, with obsolete machines that are out of circulation elsewhere, with climatic conditions and chemical phenomena not encountered in higher latitudes, and with challenges that require nonstandard fixes. Recognizing this expertise—“intensifying local and regional solutions,” as Marco Dreer put it—is a long-overdue step that professional associations must take if they truly want to represent the interests of all their global

members. The community must acknowledge that existing “universal” preservation standards are anything but. Preservation ideals are often unrealistic, unsustainable, and impractical in contexts outside of well-funded European and North American cultural heritage institutions.

Instead, Carolina Cappa and many others appealed for standards that are local and expandable and grounded in sustainable paradigms of “good” rather than “best” practices. There is an urgent need to produce local technology, low-cost machines, and low-cost practices. Simpler and cheaper solutions need to be found, but, as Lila Foster has argued, in many cases, they already exist—they just need to be made widely available.

There are initiatives within formal professional organizations that are attempting to remedy the situation, such as the Minimum Viable Archiving project (FIAT/IFTA Technical Commission), a tool kit with easy-to-implement solutions for archives with limited resources. But as presenters Caroline Fournier and Camille Blot-Wellens acknowledged, the overrepresentation of European archivists in the Technical Commission remains an issue. Again, herein resonates one of the central themes of the conference: definitions and guidelines are often grounded in social, legal, and epistemological structures, habits, environments, and institutions of the North.

Alternatives can be found, however, and we do not need to look far for inspiration. The history of cinema offers many unexpected alliances, surprising migrations, and inventive forms of solidarity. Some of them were explored in “Cross-Continental Connections,” a particularly vibrant panel that investigated the enigmas of a mislabeled Ottoman-era film from the Eye Collection (Aslı Özgen), exchanges between Mozambican and Czechoslovakian film production and distribution (Klára Trsková), and the small but hugely fascinating Tokyo Palestine Film Collection (Mohanad Yaqubi).

We have seen an inspiring selection of collaborative and community-centered projects in various stages, some of them in their tenth iteration (New York University’s APEX program) and some just taking off as prototypes (a matchmaking Tinder-like app for ar-

chives and archivists, for instance). A number of cataloging and database projects (such as *In Frame*, presented by Kate Dollenmayer and May Hong HaDuong) and experimental digitization centers (Jonathan Larcher) served as examples of ongoing local preservation efforts and raised discussions about the politics of cataloging and categorization. Novel types of partnerships were discussed in both formal and informal contexts. Rita Tjien Foooh and Arnoud Goos from the National Archives of Suriname and the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, respectively, discussed their tenancy partnership, which allows one archive to use the digital infrastructure of another without giving up ownership of the collection.

Tentative shimmers of new archival possibilities emerged in presentations that tried to reimagine precariousness as potential (Débora Butruce) and archival inaction as a refusal of the colonial gaze (Jennifer Blaylock). In her search for the physically and bureaucratically inaccessible visual memory of the United Arab Emirates, Hind Mezaina asked, what is a filmography of a place, and how is it dictated?

Mohanad Yaqubi, Jonathan Larcher, and others convincingly showed the great importance of individual collectors and non-professional collective curatorial efforts in preserving audiovisual heritage. However, as Gabriel Menotti emphasized, informal and noninstitutional practices can also represent points of failure. Another risk affecting global audiovisual heritage is the fragmentation of collections, a truly global problem that equally affects the Indigenous cinemas of Latin America (as heard in Amalia Cordova’s contribution), the countries of former Yugoslavia (Karla Crnčević), and the former Soviet Transcaucasian republics (Anri Vartanov).

Calls to action voiced at the conference included the need to recognize the role of language, for example, in translations of documents and guidelines, but also in cataloging projects that deal with collections that include local, minor, diasporic, or Indigenous languages. The importance of open source tools was also pointed out repeatedly (Sami Meddeb, Erica Carter), as was the need for shared resources and knowledge. Presenters and the audience debated thorny questions: Who should

pay for the restitution of heritage in situations of unclear legal ownership? How do we document informal networks of circulation, from smuggled VHS tapes to itinerant flash drives and social media platforms?

I was especially grateful for several panels that addressed the productive role that universities can play in supporting preservation work, in circulating audiovisual heritage, and, as emphasized by Sonia Campanini, also in decolonizing knowledge structures. One example was the roundtable on the fruitful ongoing exchanges between the University of Jos in Nigeria and various German and Italian institutions. Another example was the panel (and screening) on exiled Sudanese filmmaker Hussein Shariffe (1934–2005), which demonstrated how students—not necessarily only students of film preservation—can thoughtfully cocreate a future for our audiovisual past.

It may be that my own oblique position vis-à-vis the archive, as a scholar working in the comparatively stable environment of a university in the center of a former colonial empire, is filling me with more optimism than the situation warrants. But I left the conference with hope and a sincere sense that events like these are meaningful and necessary and do lead to concrete successes in small and big forms. The Eye conference and other similar events in recent years have established a baseline for discussion about the complexities of global audiovisual preservation and provided a platform from which we can survey some of the shared tasks. Despite everything, there is perseverance, passion, and joy, there is discovery, wonder, and accomplishment, there is a willingness to collaborate as well as solidarity, friendship, resourcefulness, and learning.

But many questions remain. Where do we move from here? How do we get politicians and policy makers to listen? How do we make archiving, as Judith Opoku-Boateng put it, a

“sexy” profession in countries where it is not? Aboubakar Sanogo appealed that we should “let newness enter the world of archiving.” Who will pay the salaries? How do we make filmmakers trust the archive in places where they don’t? How do we change film production culture and encourage filmmakers to value preservation as much as storytelling and profit? How do we change financing structures to encourage collaboration? Who needs to be lobbied, and who has to do the lobbying? How do we deal with visa restrictions that prevent people from attending these and similar events? How do we make standards realistic, inclusive, and environmentally responsible? How do we ensure that a training program or digitization project does not shut down once its funding cycle ends? As Floris Paalman asked in his closing words, how do we create financial sustainability and build viable archive economies?

I look forward to conferences that tackle this next set of questions—perhaps also elsewhere, in all the global localities to the north, south, east, and west of Amsterdam.

Marek Jancovic is assistant professor of media studies at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. His current research is centered around the materialities of the moving image, film preservation practices, media and the environment, and format studies. He is the author of *A Media Epigraphy of Video Compression: Reading Traces of Decay* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming) and, together with Axel Volmar and Alexandra Schneider, the editor of *Format Matters: Standards, Practices, and Politics in Media Cultures* (Meson Press, 2020).

NOTE

1. <https://www.eyefilm.nl/en/programme/eye-international-conference-2022/563352>.