

## IDENTIFICATION AND ASSESSMENT OF FILM APPRAISAL MECHANISMS AIMED AT THE IMPROVEMENT OF ARCHIVING AND PRESENTATION PROCESSES

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### Abstract

Národní filmový archiv, Prague (the National Film Archive, or NFA) needs to update its core cataloguing system and potentially improve preservation processes to address new requirements related to (digital) content management. Since the NFA is also active in content digitisation and restoration, new digital tools were recently deployed for the purposes of supporting operation and management processes. In order to identify how the new system could improve the efficiency of both cataloguing and content management, the entire workflow has been investigated and analysed. Together with a standard process mapping, the extent to which these processes are aligned with the institution's key activities, strategies, (individual) roles and the NFA's goals was investigated. Drawing on concepts from cultural work appraisal and practical theories, techniques developed in ethnography and organizational studies were applied to examine the way in which the value of collected material is being constructed, understood and documented; and how its perception contributes to decision-making during the organisation's regular activities. The results were analysed and communicated using process diagrams and sets of recommendations. Along with gaining better insight into the NFA's operations, this approach allows for the enhancement of the new data model. There were also several mechanisms proposed which are aimed at enriching the retrieval of information related to film content origin, treatment, perception and community appraisals; as well as the improvement of strategic decision-making processes regarding digitisation, long-term preservation and distribution priorities.

**KEYWORDS:** film appraisal, film archives, value assessment, cataloguing, collection management

### Introduction

Film archives have a relatively short history compared to other types of cultural heritage institutions, such as museums. Nevertheless, their role is already established within a range of professional associations, well-implemented preservation practices and cataloguing standards. Just like in other fields of cultural heritage preservation, a film archive's role in society and consequently its access to financial resources is in some ways linked with the perceived value of the cultural objects in its collections. As Brothman pointed out in his essay, archives also participate in value creation, since archivists both identify and create value when they attribute it to a document (Brothman, 1991). There is no doubt that underlying mechanisms, especially regarding value creation, are quite complex, but to a certain extent, an archive's activity both affects and is influenced by actual cultural preferences on global, and more specifically, national levels. This happens both in a long-term perspective, where some works become an important part of (national) cultural heritage, as well as in shorter periods of time that are identified as reflecting the momentary preferences of specific viewer groups. Digital production and distribution have simplified access to any film work available in this form and have made film consumption patterns more heterogeneous. However, widespread availability of most films is still significantly influenced by the practices of leading content distributors. Sophisticated recommendation mechanisms introduced by Netflix, among others, are changing the process through which an audience selects and consumes its content (see e.g. Hallinan and Striphos, 2016). New patterns of consumer behaviour are also altering the perception of cultural object value (see the literature review by Carnwath and Brown, 2014) and thus can contribute to more complex processes of film value attribu-

tion. Some film archives even directly monetize their content, usually in the form of digital copies or even using their own presentation/distribution channels, in order to at least partially cover their cost of operation. Therefore, at any given moment the perceived value of specific content can have a direct or indirect impact on an institution's income.

In such a situation, an archive can benefit from better insight into the existing appraisal mechanisms and the way perception of value is intertwined with preservation, presentation or monetisation processes, at least within the institution itself. This understanding can help to make decisions that are more consistent with the institution's strategy and to allow for setting priorities in multiple areas. As most processes in archives are now supported with electronic systems, user needs are repeatedly discussed whenever these software solutions are in need of being updated. Národní filmový archiv, Prague is currently facing such a situation where the outdated content management and cataloguing systems have to be replaced. Together with a relatively standard requirements gathering, the NFA took this opportunity to investigate mechanisms of content appraisal to better understand and potentially update its internal processes. These findings can help the NFA apply long-term cultural policies while also attuning presentation strategies in order to achieve more effective yet (in a cultural sense) still sensitive content monetisation. This is particularly important due to the fact that the NFA receives a subsidy from the national budget, but also has to finance approximately half of its operations from sales and licensing. We believe our research can also shed more light on film appraisal mechanisms and their practical consequences in general.

### Appraisal process in film archives

The concept of value and how it can be constituted in the appraisal process has been discussed in archival literature relatively frequently, with more attention given to historical and intrinsic value identification rather than their broader consequences for preservation practice. From an operational standpoint, document appraisal in archives is often linked with selection processes, during which the decision about its preservation or rejection is made. Throughout history, theorists like Hilary Jenkinson argued for an indiscriminate approach where archives, in accordance with their role in society, should accept all acquired material. Even though archivists have often found the necessity of the selection process uncomfortable and controversial, for most archives this process is inevitable, at least to a certain extent. Therefore, an archive that is applying a selective approach should develop and implement some kind of appropriate mechanism that allows its staff to occasionally reject material in a consistent and justified manner. In contrast with archival value identification, monetary (or intrinsic value) appraisal is not associated with the selection process and there are more specific methods for how to do it, for example based on costs, replacement costs or revenues (see also Kula, 1995). In archival literature, intrinsic and monetary values are often discussed separately alongside corresponding appraisal mechanisms. These mechanisms can be linked together more closely, especially in cases when an archive can monetise its collection through presentation or even redistribution activities, as the NFA does to a certain extent. It means that a certain form of appraisal may be necessary for other activities as well, such as selective digitisation or promotion.

Although the decision of whether to accept a specific piece of material can be based on some purely technical criteria, e.g. whether the quality of a carrier is acceptable, a more complex approach is usually needed for the assessment of historical, informative, aesthetic or any other relevant qualities for an archive's goals. As stated by Kula in 1995, a finding that still holds true today, archival literature offers only limited concrete and practical guidance regarding appraisal (Kula, 1995. p. 24). Kula himself has devoted

a significant amount of effort to investigating and explaining various aspects of film (and video) value assessment. He has also mentioned important documents in this regard, including the *Recommendation for the Safeguarding and Preservation of Moving Images* (UNESCO, 1980) and *Recommended standards and procedures of Selection and Preservation of Television Programme Material* (FIAT-IFTA, 1996). Regardless of the conceptual framework in which the discussions are held, there is always emphasis on the necessity to define specific appraisal criteria and there are various suggestions on how to do that. For example, Harrison identifies three elements in audiovisual documents, which must be accounted for in the selection process: the information content, the artifact or carrier, and the aesthetic content (Harrison, 1995). From Kula's perspective, moving images can be categorised by 'provenance', 'function' and 'form' (Kula, 1995 p. 53). In his concept, 'function' is identified to apply different evaluation criteria to various mediums, e.g., feature films, documentaries or news, and together with 'provenance', to consider a specific document's context. This finding corresponds with a common practice where selection criteria reflect the archive or collection focus and emphasis can be put on a specific film's origin, for example.

By considering that moving images can be produced in various copies and versions, another aspect of appraisal needs to be considered. According to the FRBR conceptual model, and more specifically, the guidelines provided in the *FIAF Moving Image Cataloguing Manual* (FIAF, 2016), it is possible to distinguish a work from its versions, manifestations and items. This framework is used for structuring moving image records and is usually well understood by librarians, but could also help to deconstruct the appraisal process. When physical material (an 'item' in FRBR) is assessed, some qualities are tied to that particular copy and can be examined in a specific instance, e.g., during projection. In order to appreciate more complex aspects like the film creation process or its historical context, corresponding sets of information are needed, and these are investigated and documented in relation to the work entity. The perceived value of the work may also be less stable as new information is gathered or the historical perspective changes. It means that the assessment of the work is also related to the actual amount of knowledge available at the time of appraisal. If eventual re-appraisal is based on amended data, its outcomes can be different. For practical purposes, the selection process can include rules linking a work's value with an item's quality, e.g. if the historical value of a given work is high, the corresponding item is accepted despite being in worse condition and vice versa. This approach allows for the appraisal of other copies or different versions of the same work.

Although for the newly acquired or potentially discarded material, appraisal processes are generally established and understood, other activities can be identified where content value needs to be considered. A typical example is that of a situation where films are being selected for (digital) restoration. In this case, it isn't only the historical and cultural value of a work that matters—the potential for its direct or indirect monetisation can be taken into account as well. Almost all processes that include selecting or prioritising content involve a certain form of evaluation. Each decision that includes work-level appraisal needs to be informed by the relevant contextual knowledge and data. In an ideal world, all of the information needed for such decisions would be available in searchable form through information management systems, e.g. cataloguing or content management. Unfortunately, relevant knowledge may sometimes be distributed across documents created during different processes or even available only as the expert knowledge of individuals, like archivists, not existing in written form. Therefore, appraisal is usually linked with an archive's organisational strategy, ensuring that important decisions are made only by staff members with corresponding knowledge, compe-

tencies and access to relevant data. It also means that relevant processes, roles and responsibilities need to be well-defined, even when appraisal procedures are based on group opinion and their results are formulated and applied collectively.

### Process analysis

Although content acquisition is usually formalised and supported with documented rules and/or organisational mechanisms, other instances of appraisal may be manifested through decisions made and their potential consequences alone. This is more probable in archives with a long history, whose operation is less likely to be informed by archiving theory and guidelines. If there are no established institutions or guidelines to follow, an archival institution's processes are usually based on community best practices and its own experiences, which can help to define standard workflows for a given content type. From a broader perspective, the main goals of a film archive show significant similarities across organisations worldwide. There are comparable film preservation processes established which have already been well-described in archival literature (see for example Gracy, 2007). Nevertheless, a particular archive may operate in a setup that was formed in a distinct organisational, social and cultural environment. Therefore, specific appraisal mechanisms that cannot be properly identified by studying and synthesizing general theoretical concepts have the potential to emerge. In this respect, a useful approach was proposed by Ivanov, as he tried to find continuity between recent archival theories and practice theory to identify the applicability of the latter for analysis of archival and record-keeping work. In his research paper, he demonstrates how practice theory could be applied to investigations of archival and record-keeping practices in order to analyse their common underlying features (Ivanov, 2017). In the case of the NFA, Ivanov's approach was found to be particularly promising, as methods from organizational studies could allow the examination of appraisal mechanisms and their relation to knowledge through the review of relevant processes.

Since the original intention of the NFA was to identify user requirements for the new content management and cataloguing system, we were looking for methods that could allow for both the investigation of the organisation's processes and its users' behavior/needs. After reviewing several methods, it was found that principles taken from the well-established Interaction Design (as described, among others, by Cooper et al., 2012) were the most suitable for NFA's purposes. By following this framework, qualitative data about users and their goals within archival processes were collected using ethnographic field study techniques—both observation and semi-structured contextual interviews. These interviews were conducted to cover all of the actors participating in key NFA processes, including content acquisition, record-keeping and digitisation. Based on data gathered and interpreted, process flow diagrams (Figure 1) were created and verified with heads of departments responsible for each area. Particular attention was paid to processes related to presentation, as these can have a direct impact on content monetisation.

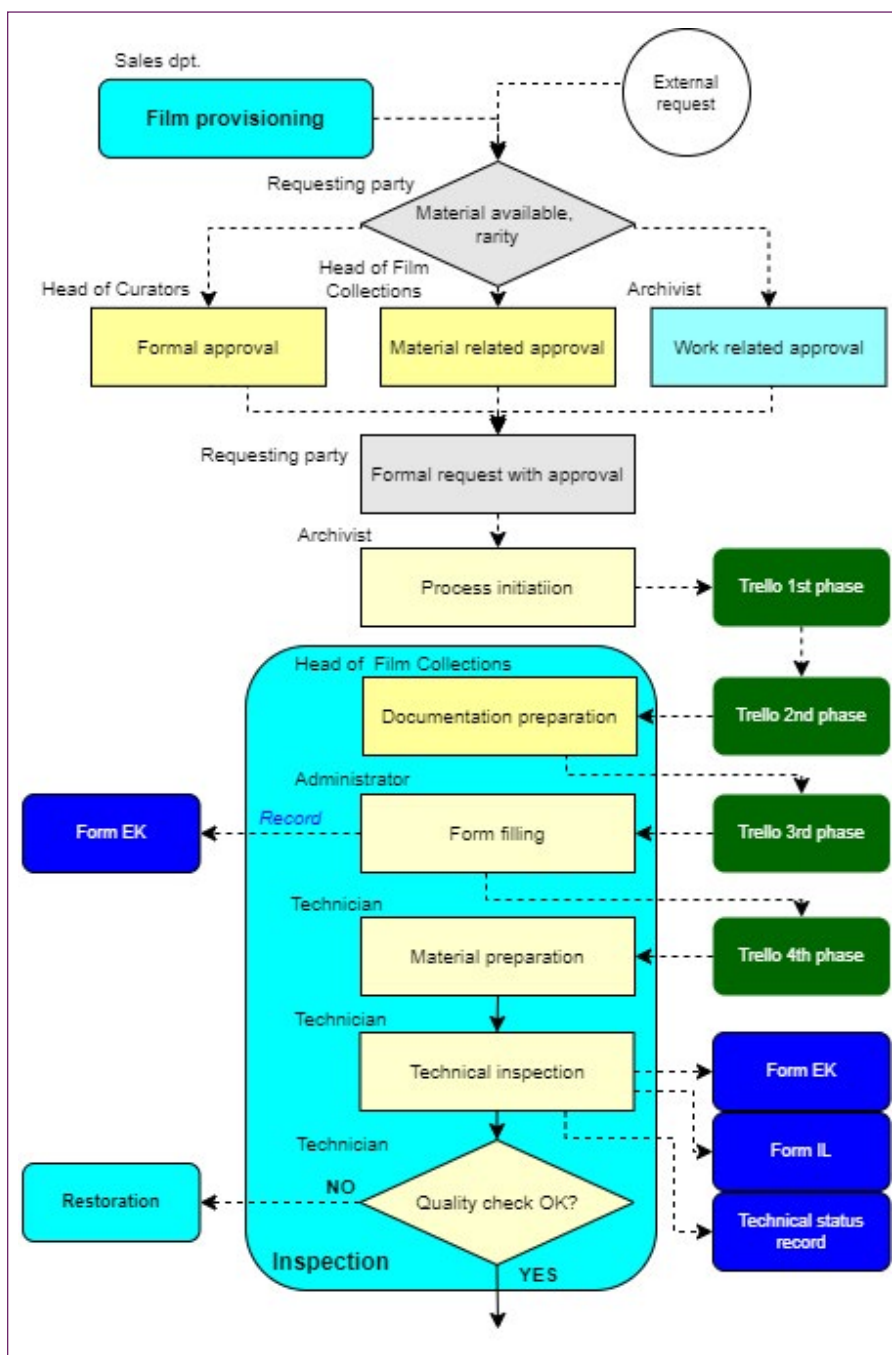


Figure 1. Portion of a process flow diagram created during NFA’s process analysis.

These processes are quite common for film archives in general and follow the film preservation activities described by Gracy (Gracy, 2007). Together with the main processes, supporting activities were also addressed to cover all important decisive points related to collected material acquisition, documentation, preservation and presentation, for both physical and digital items. Each process flow diagram contains the identification of roles, responsibilities, physical and digital content that was processed/managed, and documentation tools—both paper-based and digital—that were used. For decisive points, specific criteria are identified together with the roles and responsibilities of agents involved. After being validated by participating staff members and NFA management representatives, process flow diagrams were also used for the following purposes:

- to identify the way in which key decisions related to content acquisition, manipulation and dissemination are made
- to find the steps through which the content appraisal was applied—both through the use of specific criteria and/or individual knowledge and skills—to make decisions or to set priorities
- to learn if and what kind of knowledge was used to support appraisal/decision making, as well as how it was retrieved
- to examine the documentation of decisions or processes (if available) and to identify areas where there is room for improvement
- to find out how processes can be tracked and documented more effectively to support knowledge sharing and record keeping
- to identify external factors that can affect decisions leading to content selection or prioritisation.

Findings were formulated in the form of recommendations regarding improvements to processes, document management and process tracking tools. There were also some suggestions provided regarding the metadata structure update since the data model for film records was amended according to the EN 15907 standard.

### Discussion of results

The NFA's activities and internal processes can be better understood within a historical context. The NFA was formed from the Film Archive of the Czechoslovak Film Institute after the split of Czechoslovakia into the separate Czech and Slovak Republics in the early 90s. Before that, the Film Archive was able to benefit from a rather unique situation where all film production was under the Czechoslovak Film Commission and there was a centrally managed system with uniform selection standards applied. Corresponding appraisal policies reflected this situation and were prescribed in a document called 'Definition of the Scientific Principles of the Selection of Film/Audiovisual Records' (for more details see Trnka, 2018). During the last few decades, due to the legal deposit of films becoming a part of Czech legislature and feature films being received in digital format, the acquisition process has become less formalised and there is almost no selection taking place; more specifically, the process is now related to special film categories like student films or raw footage. Despite this inclusive approach, a standard acquisition process was established and applied to each piece of film entering the NFA that involved dedicated committees. Our research shows that these committees were (and still are) formed mostly pragmatically, reflecting staff skills and knowledge rather than positions in the organisational structure or management. Nevertheless, this is a topic that is up for revision with the new generation of archivists and curators. Together with following a formalised acquisition procedure, committee members also decide on the removal of materials from the collection (a rare occurrence), and can initiate duplicating processes. Consequently, both decisions affect the accumulated value of specific

film work, as better quality and a greater number of copies means higher work availability both for researchers and more importantly for external audiences.

Another significant point is that committee members participate in various processes that involve other decisions related to content that mainly affect its presentation and monetisation. Since works in the NFA are not organised according to thematic collections, and a specific material's item-level history does not play a significant role in the collections and the way they are organised, the work's provenance usually does not affect its acquisition and it is documented quite briefly. The initial appraisal is more closely linked to the evaluation of acquired material at the item level, where, for example, a better copy of a film already included in the collection can be obtained. The amount, type (negative, positive) and conditions of material for each film are also important both for preservation and presentation activities. To facilitate this process, a special parameter called 'rareness' was introduced and expressed with a numerical value. The assignment of this parameter can be seen as a sort of value attribution, although it is rather technical and has several arbitrary purposes, for example it was also used to distinguish censored versions. Key technical parameters of the material are documented in an electronic form and linked with the work's filmographic records. These records are detailed, well-structured and contain a lot of information, including a work's historical origin, detailed credits, content of the picture and awards. The process flow diagrams show that although record creation is separated from most archival processes at the NFA, data in the main catalogue are used as a central reference point for many decisions, and there are well-established mechanisms for how to amend or update a record if needed.

Although other forms of film appraisal were not explicitly mentioned by staff members who were interviewed, there were several identified instances where content value had been considered. It was also possible to observe situations where value-related decisions in one process affected certain priorities in another one. For example, when a film is selected for screening, the approval process also implies a technical inspection of the film copy (item), which is normally done over a longer period. The NFA provides digitised content, the rights of which are cleared, to third parties for both nonprofit and commercial purposes (e.g., to illustrate historical events), promotes Czech films in festivals and initiates the distribution of digitally restored copies. These activities have a certain impact on digitisation process priorities and can also initiate further investigations necessary for identifying suitable content and contextual data supporting its relevance. The EN 15907 standard already provides corresponding metadata fields (Figure 2) for documenting content distribution activities, so its adequate implementation can help to provide more insight.

Field name	Suggested content
Publication	NFA publications referring to the work
Restoration	If and when the film was (digitally) restored
Home viewing publication	If and when the film was distributed on DVD or Blu-ray
Broadcast	Copy in broadcast distribution
Internet	Copy in Internet distribution (streaming portals)

Figure 2. Examples of EN 15907 fields that allow for the documentation of film content promotion and distribution activities.

Some NFA curators who participate in internal decision-making processes also actively contribute to both academic and popular publications. In this way, they can express their cultural preferences and influence public opinion regarding the value of films in the NFA collection. Moreover, their (filmographic) research in some ways takes part in the value attribution to a work, since they improve the contextualised knowledge stored both in the NFA's extensive library and also disseminated in publications and periodicals. The extent to which these activities affect the generally perceived value of a specific film needs to be investigated, but there are certain indicators, like festival awards for digitally restored films or redistributed content popularity, that can be monitored in this regard. Unfortunately, this growing knowledge is not often directly linked with records in the NFA's main catalogue, so its effective application during operational decisions still mostly depends on the participation of appropriate individuals. Also, data gathered to support decisions related to content monetisation are not formalised or centrally stored. This is where the process analysis allowed us to identify a significant amount of provisional documentation created by actors, such as archivists, which is not managed or included in the NFA's document management system. These documents contain valuable data that can, if more effectively shared and linked with records, help make various processes more efficient. Although some of the task management tools (e.g., Trello) have already been implemented at the NFA, the workflow analysis revealed a huge potential for improved process tracking and more automatic data gathering. The resulting knowledge can have significant value itself both concerning film works and for the purposes of archival practice in general, but only in the case that the relevant knowledge can be preserved and shared.

## Conclusion

In situations where initial content selection is rarely applied, an institution can experience only a limited need for establishing complex work-appraisal mechanisms with documented rules that are informed by organisational goals and strategies. Nevertheless, there should be well-defined material evaluation procedures in place to allow for sustainable content preservation, at least at the item level. These procedures, together with digitisation, also affect the content availability in regard to its efficient presentation, possible monetisation and further research. Our findings indicate that during various activities, there is some form of content appraisal applied at least for defining priorities. When making curatorial, preservation or distribution related decisions, institutions should consider how these decisions might influence a film's cultural/historical and potential monetary value. Appropriate strategies can then allow a maximum increase



in all these values through the decisions made at key moments. A process flow analysis can help to identify these decisive moments, together with corresponding roles and responsibilities, and to recognise specific knowledge or data required. Correct and appropriately implemented decision-making mechanisms can in the long term contribute to an institution's success, e.g., in terms of reputation and sufficient funding. Therefore, it is also important to understand how and what kind of knowledge can support these mechanisms, how to collect the additional data required, how to store it efficiently and how to make it accessible whenever it is needed. The update of an institution's systems for content management and cataloguing provides a good opportunity for analysing and potentially revising its operations.

The NFA found itself exactly in this situation, since the new electronic systems need to support both the NFA's traditional preservation activities and its new services, which include digitisation and digital content exchange. The systematic approach taken allowed the NFA to examine all of its key processes, roles and responsibilities, as well as to pay attention to appraisal mechanisms. The results were used to identify key decisive points, improve documentation and knowledge sharing and introduce new tools for better content management. Our findings illustrate how an interdisciplinary approach to investigations originally limited to system upgrades can contribute both to understanding various mechanisms and to a discussion about content value appraisal in general. This approach also opens opportunities for the refinement of internal processes and the construction of new information systems that address the need for more efficient metadata management without making it too rigid and centralised; or more radically, it opens opportunities to consider a more innovative approach to recordkeeping, as proposed by Findlay (Findlay, 2017). With the growth of collaboration between archives and a tendency to be more open to the public, there can also be a more apparent 'participatory approach' introduced, as described in relevant literature (Huvila, 2008). This means that external actors can be invited to add relevant pieces of information and participate in the appraisal process, e.g. by creating their own selections of works with justifications for the purposes of knowledge enhancement. Overall, all of these steps can underpin an institution's position in society in a variety of ways.

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