

Dear Mr. Hernández-Ros,

I would like to apologize for my belated contribution to the consultation process regarding the i2010 Digital Libraries project. Through my own fault, I have become aware of the project details only very recently, so my contribution primarily consists of a plea in support of Mr. Vladimir Opela's statement which you have recently received.

I fully subscribe to the position mapped out in the contribution made by Mr. Opela (National Film Archive, Prague). His paper ends with a clear and succinct statement: "Digitalisation without due care of original materials can imperil the diversity of European cultural heritage." As director of the Austrian Film Museum, I fully endorse this statement and would like to offer some further background on the topic.

The Communication "i2010 Digital Libraries" does not take into account the essential difference between PRESERVATION and ACCESS and instead mixes them up to a dangerous degree. "Dangerous" in the sense that the Communication does not mention the most essential category in the fields of Cultural Heritage, archival and museum work: the ARTEFACTS (archivalia, "museum objects").

It is only the ARTEFACT in its original shape and medium where the material history of any given work or document and the basic inseparability of its "form" and "content" can become apparent. The artefact shows us that the so-called "form" and "content" of a given work or document are not two complementary, mutually exclusive "parts" of a whole, but only two "perspectives", two discursive constructs to describe one and the same "whole". The artefact shows how "form" must necessarily be a part of "content" and vice versa; and how the two are intertwined in the material history and cultural meaning of each work or document.

Therefore, the artefact in its original shape and medium is also the place where the intrinsic values of the work or document reside. The public as well as the specialized scholar will always have to return to this place to fully grasp the meaning, the essence and the material history of the work or document. This, of course, holds true for "trivial" objects from everyday life just as much as for "precious" works of art or historical documents.

The bond between works/documents and their history and meaning is what we call Cultural Heritage. In order not to break this bond, all communities and nations are primarily called upon to PRESERVE the ARTEFACT in its most original shape and medium, and, in addition, to also DISPLAY and MAKE ACCESSIBLE the ARTEFACT in its most original shape and medium.

Beyond this PRIMARY stage and primary duty, many SECONDARY forms of DISPLAY and ACCESS have become available through the technologies of reproduction. Today, digital technology offers a wide array of such reproductions and secondary forms of display. All of these technologies have helped to enlarge the scholarly and public consciousness of culture and its elements. However, while they can give wide access to SOME characteristics of the work or document, the technologies of reproduction do not give access to the artefact (= the work or document "itself"). DIGITALISATION, therefore, can never be a means of PRESERVING the work or document, but only a means of giving ADDITIONAL ACCESS to a LIMITED RANGE of characteristics which the reproduction shares with the artefact.

These relations are basic to all activities in the field of Cultural Heritage. But even when disregarding these relations, there are also proven TECHNICAL grounds which necessitate a strict separation of PRESERVATION and DIGITALISATION. Mr. Opela has already succinctly commented on these aspects in his paper. (On the topic of preserving vs. digitalizing the European film heritage, see also the Final Report of the "FIRST project", an "Accompanying Measure" in the context of the IST Programme.)

In short: the term DIGITAL PRESERVATION seems dangerously misleading. It should be used in one context only: the preservation of works or documents which are digitally-born AND originally published in digital media. However, these latter cases (which certainly represent a growing problem all over the world) would be much better served by calling them PRESERVATION OF DIGITAL - if only to better separate the activity (PRESERVATION) from its object (in this case, DIGITAL-born works or documents).

The misleading term DIGITAL PRESERVATION is too often understood as "preserving a non-digital object by digitalizing it" (= digitally reproducing it into a different medium). Therefore, the term produces wrong notions, obscures the truth and adversely affects a centuries-old activity on which European civilization prides itself: PRESERVATION OF THE ARTEFACT IN ITS ORIGINAL SHAPE AND MEDIUM.

All of this should not detract from the many positive functions that REPRODUCTION (digital or not) can fulfill in the fields of education, entertainment and innovation. The EC plan for European digital libraries is certainly to be commended as a secondary stage of making widely accessible, by reproduction into digital media, SOME CHARACTERISTICS of the works and documents which form the European Cultural Heritage.

It should be highlighted, however, that - at least in the case of European moving image artefacts - the primary stage has not yet been achieved: the activities of PRESERVING and DISPLAYING the works and documents IN THEIR ORIGINAL SHAPE AND MEDIUM are still in need of far-reaching support on a European level. Previous EU programmes (mostly during the 1990s) have improved the situation, but were stopped before the goal could be reached. I am convinced that only this kind of support, if re-instituted, could create the basis for further development and distribution of the moving image heritage in Europe.

With best regards,  
Alexander Horwath

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Alexander Horwath  
Direktor

Österreichisches Filmmuseum - The Austrian Film Museum  
Augustinerstrasse 1, A-1010 Wien  
T +43/1/533 70 54-11  
[www.filmmuseum.at](http://www.filmmuseum.at)  
Honorary President:  
Martin Scorsese