

The Active Archive:
Interview with Film Critic Andrei Rus

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Abstract: The interview with dr. Andrei Rus, associate professor at UNATC Bucharest, tried to cover both the motivations and the developing process of the Active Archive projects, a work in progress activity of research, selection, digitalization, and dissemination of several old documentaries from the Sahia Studio Archives, on one hand, and several experimental movies made by students of the UNATC in the Sixties and Seventies on the other hand.

Keywords: Andrei Rus, archives, archives activation, film archives.

For this special issue of *Studia UBB Dramatica*, we invited Andrei Rus, PhD, associate professor at Theatre and Film University „I. L. Caragiale” Bucharest, to share with us the roots, the developing of ideas and the elaboration process of the project *Active Archives*, dedicated to salvaging and regeneration of old documentaries and experimental movies – a project so enthusiastically received especially by young spectators at the TIFF Festival in Cluj in 2020 and 2021.



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Miruna Runcan: *How did you get the idea to activate the archives, what motivated you, both from a personal and from a systemic/institutional point of view (if the case may be)?*

Andrei Rus: I have had a passion for the Film and Cinema Archive ever since I came to Bucharest, at 18, when I realized that it was nothing like what I had seen in Paris, the summer before I got into college. I was crazy about Henri Langlois' cinema, having read about it in the interviews published in *Cahiers du cinema* magazine in the '60s, and found out about him from my idol of the time, filmmaker Francois Truffaut. When I returned to Bucharest, after anonymously spending a couple of evenings attending the projections of the French Cinematheque, having recently become a student of the School of Film, I realised that very few people attended the Bucharest cinematheque; and through a certain series of events, I started a temporary collaboration on programming with this institution. I even began to organize a Cineclub twice a week, in the framework of which I met a lot of film lovers and colleagues from other departments, who later on joined me in setting up the Film Menu magazine and on organizing many projections in the cinema hall of UNATC (Bucharest National University of Theatre and Film "I.L. Caragiale").

However, with regard to the archive, I think an important event that marked the development of my relationship with it was the year I spent with the Ministry of Culture (2016) as the cinema advisor to Ministers of Culture Vlad Alexandrescu and Corina Şuteu; during that period, the project closest to my heart involved the coordination of a large-scale assessment of the situation of the Jilava Film Archive. At that time, dozens of filmmakers, experts of the State Archives, the National Library, and other relevant European archives visited our Archive and left behind reports of what they thought should be done to improve its situation and to preserve and present the films. That was when I started to grasp how many things had to be done and how little the Romanian government valued this archive in fact, as it was extremely poorly funded considering its huge heritage value for Romanian culture.

I literally started “digging” through the archives, looking for treasures that deserved to be rediscovered and which were only brought back to the public attention last year, in 2020, when UNATC celebrated its 70th anniversary. I suggested to my colleagues that the festive actions include a project to digitize and remaster certain student films in the UNATC archives. Thus, the project *Arhiva Activă (Active Archive)* was born, whose second edition is happening this year. Last year, myself and Ana Szel, who was part of the 2016 work groups in Jilava and later coordinated the recovery of the written archive of Sahia Studio, thought it would be interesting to research documentaries based on author-related criteria, in an attempt to look at and present to the audience fragments of the films created by important, but lesser-known directors, who had worked with a genre (documentary) that was traditionally despised by most Romanian critics and experts. That’s how, this year, a project dedicated to documentary-makers was born in the framework of One World Romania Cineclub. So far, we have uploaded on cineclub.sahiavintage.ro five documentary programmes dedicated to filmmakers such as Paul Călinescu, Jean Mihail, Ada Pistiner, or Florica Holban, and to writers like Nina Cassian, Geo Bogza, or Radu Cossaşu. About two thirds of the films presented in the project were digitized especially for this occasion, otherwise they were very rarely accessible to Romanian or international spectators.

M. R.: *What are the previous experiences that influenced you? What models led you to this active recovery?*

A. R.: As I mentioned earlier, I grew up with this romantic idea of the French Cinematheque, but in the meantime, I had the chance to visit the Bologna Archive and the one in Amsterdam (called *Eye Institute*), too, and I was impressed by their resources, their impeccable organization, and their local and international importance, much bigger than the Bucharest Archive’s. Let alone that certain kinds of audio-visual archives in Romania, although extremely important, are presently not kept at all, there is not a dedicated institution, such as INA in France, which is a real disaster. I remember that a couple of years ago a friend called me to say that the cassettes of TV shows

and the videos produced by the music channel *Atomic* were about to be thrown away, as they took up too much space in an office building. She asked whether I knew of an institution that could receive them. And I didn't, because there is not such an institution.

M. R.: *I can assure you that, in theatre, things are even worse. A project of this kind, however, requires certain specific methodologies: which are these?*

A. R.: With regard to the two projects aiming to recover certain archive films (*Active Archive* and the *OWR Cineclub*), the method was straightforward. First of all, we watched the films in chronological order, starting with the oldest ones in the UNATC archive (produced in 1966), and for the first film programme, presented for the first time in Cluj at the 2020 edition of TIFF, we only selected films from the period we had looked at until that point (1966-1971). In the meantime, as I watch more materials in the archive, and as more colleagues join me in this effort, we will put together all kinds of programmes, based on thematic or other criteria. As for the *Cineclub*, the guiding principle was to conduct a research as exhaustive as possible on the non-fictional works of certain filmmakers, and to create programmes by selecting the films that we find most relevant and exciting. Of course, if we had the money, it would be worth digitizing and publicly distributing all their films, perhaps in different programmes. Because of the financial shortfalls, we have to choose a small number of films, so we stop at the most important ones in their careers, hoping to return to them when possible, and to present the rest of their creations.

M. R.: *I think it is important that you also describe to us how the projects come to being, what are their objectives, who are the beneficiaries, even the partners, if any.*

A. R.: In the case of the *Active Archive*, I hope in time UNATC will develop a dedicated department or office, with permanent staff, to manage this rich archive more closely than we are able to from the outside, and to slowly take over and process other kinds of audio-visual archives, some even private, and make them available to scholars. As for both projects, my biggest hope, which

I am currently working on, is that UNATC engages in a more active partnership with the Film archive and the Cinematheque, thus contributing to covering some of their logistical, professional and even financial needs. The ideal situation would be that, in the not-so-distant future, UNATC develops a study line dedicated to archiving and restoring, so a close collaboration in this sense would benefit both parties.

M. R.: I share your view that art universities should have more to say and a more pro-active attitude in this sense, as part of their own research system. But perhaps it would be good to mention the difficulties you've had, how to overcome them, if possible...

A. R.: The biggest hardship is the financial aspect, as there is little money compared to the number of films worth digitizing, remastering, and presenting to the audience. To overcome these, we need patience, though the process will give rise to all sorts of frustrations; and most of all, we need to adapt the size of the project depending on the resources available at a certain moment.

M. R.: How do you ensure your project's visibility? Of course, this is first and foremost a question of funding, but perspectives should inevitably be considered. Any concrete suggestions (since an interview allows us for dreaming, too)?

A. R.: I think the ideal situation would include different financial sources for the recovery and the restoration of the audio-visual works making up our national heritage. Presently, NGOs can only access limited lines of funding for small projects, such as the ones I coordinate. However, to me, the most critical aspect is that the institution itself (the National Film Archive) lacks annual resources to restore as many national heritage films as possible. I recently spoke to Rene Wolf, Head of acquisitions and programmer of Amsterdam's *Eye Institute*, that not only restores films, but can also afford to preserve them on 35 mm, i.e., the best and safest method to preserve films. It doesn't cost a fortune, but the government must be interested to invest in such mechanisms and procedures meant to preserve audio-visual works.

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