



The First Film Archive

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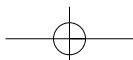
Frame from "Kong Haakons Kroning i Trondhjem" / "The Coronation of King Haakon in Trondheim, Nordisk Films Kompagni, 1906.

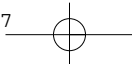
HOW THE ARCHIVE STARTED

"Den Danske Stats Arkiv for Films og Stemmer" [The Danish state's archive for films and voices], the first film archive in Denmark, came about through a meeting at the Royal Danish Library on 9 April 1913. As its name indicates it was also intended for sound recordings, but in the following we will concentrate on the moving image.

The impetus for the archive came from Anker Kirkeby (1884-1957), who was associated with Politiken, a national daily, for more than fifty years. He had close ties to the paper's editor-in-chief, Henrik Cavling (1855-1933), under whose leadership Politiken became the leading newspaper in the country. Instead of concentrating on opinion and comment Cavling featured the most important event each day along with a wide range of topics in an easily accessible format that covered the readers' whole lives, while not entirely relinquishing the paper's polemical, radical pedigree.

Kirkeby thrived in this setting. He did not only write about events, but arranged them as well; as the *Dansk Biografisk Leksikon* so aptly says: "In the form of journalism in





which the journalist creates his own news and in which a newspaper mobilizes the interest of its readership, Kirkeby showed great initiative and thoroughness”.

Kirkeby, who had considered becoming an actor and a missionary, was given the chance to develop all his talents on Politiken. He was not only the motive force behind the first film archive but also very much wrote its history. Much source material relating to the archive seems to have disappeared, and so in the present article we have to rely on Kirkeby's own words to a great extent; words naturally coloured by his interest in the matter.

The archive was originally conceived as an archive in the usual sense: as a place which collects, keeps, and gives access to something from elsewhere. Kirkeby himself arranged for filming to take place. He contacted Ole Olsen (1863-1943) the founder of *Nordisk Films Kompagni*, and got the company to shoot a number of short films of historical interest at no charge. On 10 December 1911 a contract was signed:

“On the shooting of cinematographic portraits of celebrated personages who may be of historical interest to posterity”¹. The contract also stated that: “The film shall be donated to the Danish state as the core of a historical museum of moving pictures”¹.

Ole Olsen was an excellent businessman and his motive for getting involved in this hardly profitable project cannot be fully explained. Some reasons can be found, however: Firstly, according to D. Yde-Andersen² Kirkeby had done Olsen a favour in a dispute between the film maker and a Norwegian newspaper, and secondly, Kirkeby and Olsen got on well. Poul Malmkjær writes in his biography of Olsen that “Ole Olsen may have said that he had no friends but only acquaintances, but it must be said that his acquaintanceship with Kirkeby was lifelong.”³ Thirdly, at the time Olsen was trying to turn film into a more respectable medium and a helping hand offered to a state archive might be a step in the right direction. Fourthly, Olsen was interested in film as a medium for education and upbringing that might also mean good business if the authorities began to use film for such purposes.

Shooting continued for some time. It consisted not of a series of independent films but of sequences to be combined into a greater whole; a “historical film” with Anker Kirkeby in the lead. In 1920 Anker Kirkeby wrote (modestly omitting to mention his in every way considerable involvement):

For three years a journalist worked on making a film to ensure for posterity images of the old Copenhagen before it disappeared for good and portraits of the most celebrated contemporary Danish personages before it became too late to obtain moving pictures of them. To make the film cohesive and natural he gathered these disparate snapshots into a journalistic kaleidoscope. The framework was the lifecycle of Politiken between two sunrises, describing a single issue. (...) By shooting this historical film he wanted to nudge the state into taking on the task and capturing important people and events and preserving these historical documents for posterity. Hitherto the professional film photographers had shot miles of film of all the feather boas and silk top



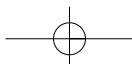
Anker Kirkeby. Frame from “Den russiske Længdesvømmer Romantschenko ved Langelinje” / Russian Long Distance Swimmer Romantschenko at Langelinje, 1913, (detail). Politiken.

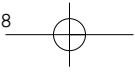


Anker Kirkeby acts in “Kgl. Skuespiller Olaf Poulsen i sit Paaklædningværelse paa Det kgl. Teater” / Royal Actor Olaf Poulsen in His Dressing Room at the Royal Theatre” 1913. Politiken.



Ole Olsen, ca. 1906





hats who appeared at official occasions, but the men and women who will really mean Denmark to history do their works in a retiring silence that makes it necessary to seek them out. Meanwhile a kind of state filmologist would record our feasts and events, our popular life and street scenes, our farming practices and our artisans at work, our buildings and our costumes; in short, a film archive would be created for cultural research, a living mirror of Denmark from the beginning of the 19th century onwards⁴.

Without meeting trouble halfway we can see in these words the problems and conflicts of interest that just had to come. For example, the archive would not only collect but seek out, and seek out what was of no immediate commercial or official interest. Meanwhile the films would be shot with a specific purpose in mind, “a journalistic kaleidoscope” to encourage research into the history of a culture. Kirkeby possessed an idea rather than a strict plan.

But at first things went as intended. Anker Kirkeby was able to use Politiken to drum up support. On 24 March 1913 he wrote in a prominently displayed article:

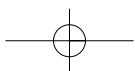
Politiken has taken the initiative for the recording of a historical film in which posterity will find moving portraits of celebrated Danes from our time. Nordisk Film Kompagni has been working for a year and a half on carrying out this plan and is now shooting the final footage. This historical film will be donated to the state to form the core of a historical film museum.

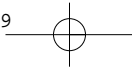
In his article Kirkeby provided a vivid description of the contents of the sequences shot. On the basis of his description we can only conclude that the material actually handed to the first film archive was unfortunately cut compared to the original footage. Kirkeby went on to provide a “future perspective” of what might be shot henceforth:

An evening at the Writers’ Union, a lecture at the Academy of Sciences, a session of parliament before the move to Kristiansborg, a final round dance by Grethe Ditlevsen, Elna Jørgen Jensen and Emilie Smith. The changing of the guard outside Amalienborg for the last time, a festival evening in the Tivoli Gardens, and so forth ...

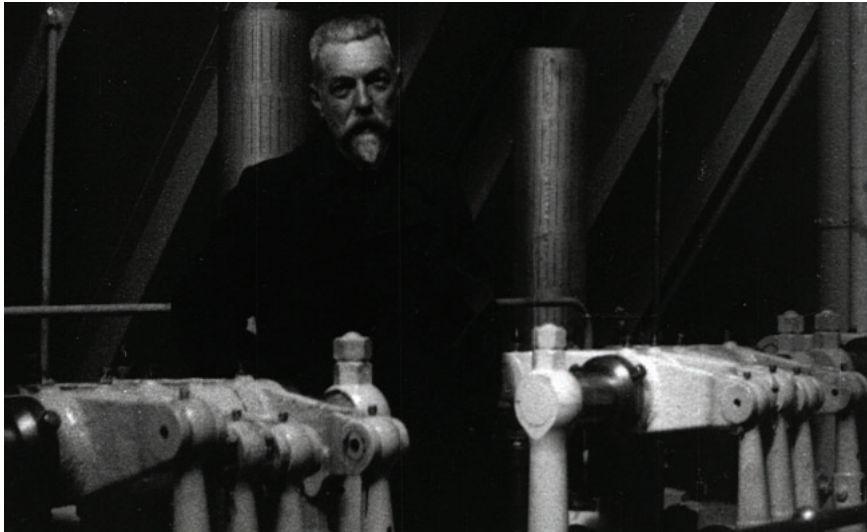
Nothing came of it, and the guards are still changing outside Amalienborg – the royal family did not move into Kristiansborg (Christiansborg) after all. However, Kirkeby was farsighted with regard to the foundation of the archive and collected further material for it. Finally he wrote: “We have had talks with Ole Olsen and court photographer Peter Elfelt; they have both promised that the day the museum comes into being they will donate all their films of historical interest”.

This came to pass. The plans were well advanced. An interview with Ole Olsen in *Hver 8. Dag* on 2 March 1913 concluded: “In continuation of the interview above we may tell our readers that the fortunate film king is considering donating all his films of historical interest (...) – and moreover a suitable sum of money for the foundation of a film museum.”





Just prior to the great day on which the archive was founded Kirkeby related another episode from the collection of material. On 9 April 1913 he wrote under the headline "A Day in the Sign of the Cinema. Through the Sound aboard the World's Largest Diesel Vessel. Filming for 'The Historical Film'". It is apparent that much contrivance was involved in the shooting:



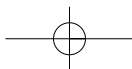
Frame from "Direktør Ivar Knudsen til Prøvesejllads om Bord paa et Dieselskib..." / Director Ivar Knudsen on a Trial Run on Board a Diesel Ship..., 1913. Politiken.

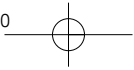
"That's a good background!" The director declares, and gives Captain Jensen, who is commanding the ship as the most senior officer in the company, a telescope, and company director Knudsen a log table. The camera begins to whirr. He goes on, "Bravo!" The director shouts. Now we will go below to the engine rooms. (...) The company director is posed once more and the film photographer asks him to look pleased— Think of next year's accounts! Admiral Richelieu suggests. And the crank is turned again.

Between these shots Kirkeby reveals that there was also time to shoot "a lovely panorama film to the Tre Kroner Meter", and the director also received inspiration for a film about a shipwreck – this was of course all going on at the same time as the great Nordisk Film Kompagni project *Atlantis* (August Blom, 1913) in the wake of the sinking of the *Titanic*.

At any rate on 9 April 1913 the archive came into being. Kirkeby wrote in Politiken on 10 April:

At a meeting at the Royal Danish Library a motion for the establishment of a national history archive for moving pictures and phonograms was adopted. Company director Ole Olsen and court photographer Elfelt immediately made their historical films available. Faster than foresight dared hope this historical





archive for moving pictures and voices has come about. While speculators have been setting up new film factories and literature arguing whether film is art or non-art, a few interested men have resolutely taken the initiative to ensure the state a cinematographical and phonographical collection.

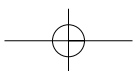
Those at the meeting included Peter Elfelt (1866-1931), Ole Olsen, and “a member of the Politiken editorial team”, obviously Kirkeby. Under the heading “What the archive currently has as its disposal” Kirkeby mentions: Films from Peter Elfelt, Nordisk Films Kompagni (“all the historical films they have shot over the years”) and the “Historical Film” from Politiken. The article reveals that the location of the archive was discussed, and that “Moreover there are a number of rules for the use of the archive which will be determined shortly by negotiation among those interested”. Should access be restricted to researchers? Or should public screenings be arranged? Despite these uncertainties Kirkeby concludes on an optimistic note; “The most important thing has happened: the archive *exists!*”

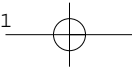
THE ARCHIVE FILMS

However, the core had not been collected yet. Sadly, not all the historical films by Peter Elfelt and Nordisk Film Kompagni found their way to the Royal Library, but nevertheless it was a major donation, to which Ole Olsen also attached a trust sum. On 3 May 1913 31 films were received from Nordisk Film Kompagni, on 28 April 1914 20 from Peter Elfelt, and finally 19 from Politiken on 23 February 1915. Thus Politiken did not contribute the “Historical Film” but 19 shorts of which some were part of the “Historical Film” but others were apparently shot after the foundation of the archive. We also note that fiction films were not deemed worthy of the archive at all.



Peter Elfelt. 1903.





After this good start things came to a halt. Anker Kirkeby had expected new donations from film companies and direct state subvention would ensure the continual augmentation of the collection but this only happened to a small degree. In 1941 there were only just over a hundred films in the archive. The new acquisitions included film shot at Reunification (of German territories to the south) in 1920, films from Greenland, Iceland and the Faeroe islands, several portraits of celebrated Danes, and - way beyond the original purpose of the archive - film from Russia after the Revolution. Time and time again Kirkeby tried to get things moving again, but in vain, and Ole Olsen tried at least once to obtain permission to film for the archive, in conjunction with the signing of the new constitution in 1915. But his suggestion met no sympathy from the authorities. It was not until the films had been moved to the National Museum at around the time of the Second World War that things started moving again and the collection gradually grew to several thousand films. Finally the films were transferred to the Danish Film Museum in 1988, now the *Danish Film Institute/Museum and Cinematheque*.

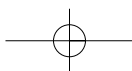
Despite Kirkeby's persistence the archive was not the success of which he had dreamt. It was almost forgotten. There were probably several reasons, of which we may list the following: Firstly, the job of the archive had never been clearly defined, nor who was to undertake it. Secondly the legislative basis to secure material for the archive (e.g. by compelling film companies to submit their works) had not been enacted Thirdly the Royal Library was not a suitable place for storing film. The moving image was beyond the scope of the library and the collection was left to deteriorate in the library basement. Fourthly, no framework for communicating the content of the archive had been set up that might have created academic or popular interest and carried the archive forward. Finally, after the end of the First World War Peter Elfelt and Ole Olsen were on their way out of Danish film history.

Although the good intentions did not benefit posterity as much as Kirkeby had wished, the 70 films submitted as a result of the meeting on 9 April 1913 provide a unique prospect of Danish non-fiction film history.

THE CONTRIBUTORS

Peter Elfelt pioneered film in Denmark. He was the leading photographer in Copenhagen with close connections to the court. In 1900 he was appointed court photographer. Film was a secondary occupation for Elfelt but by no means just a hobby. He was a very thorough man in every way. He got the almost ingeniously dextrous Jens Poul Andersen (?-1935) to build a ciné-camera and he started one of the first cinemas in the city, *Københavns Kinoptikon*, in 1901, although it lost money and closed shortly afterwards.

Peter Elfelt's films were shown in various connections: at variety shows, in more or less temporary cinemas, at events Elfelt arranged by Elfelt around the country, or for the royal family and the German imperial court. Elfelt's donation is of course characterised by his close relations with the royal family. Thanks to Christian IX -





Frame from "Kejseren af Ruslands Ankomst til Helsingør" / *The Emperor of Russia's Arrival in Elsinore, 1901. Elfelt.*



Frame from "Reel af Livjægerne paa Amager" / *The Reel from "Livjægerne paa Amager, 1906. Elfelt.*

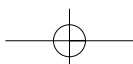
celebrated the 'father-in-law of Europe' - the Danish royal family had wide-reaching links with other monarchies in Europe: those of Russia, Germany, the United Kingdom, Greece, Sweden and Norway. There were many visits from these courts and contemporary society showed a keen interest. As well as the formal aspects of these occasions Elfelt's films also show us the more informal tone for which these royal holidaymakers enjoyed coming to Denmark, where things were often rather less complicated than in their own countries.

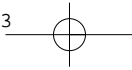
Another Elfelt specialty was his short ballet films shot in his studio. With one or two exceptions his contribution to the first film archive covers the period before Ole Olsen became the leading figure in Danish film.

Ole Olsen began showing films as early as 1900 while he was the hugely successful director of the Malmö Tivoli ["Tivoli" means amusement park or pleasure gardens, *tr.*] His film projections were not a success but his catchpenny entertainments made Olsen a wealthy man and he did not forget film entirely. In 1905 he started a cinema in Copenhagen, *Biograf-Theatret*. It was a success and to obtain sufficient films for it he began to shoot them himself. After a number of insignificant sequences he filmed events on the occasion of the death of Christian IX; this may be viewed as the start of his great contribution to Danish film history. In 1906 he started Nordisk Films Kompagni, which soon became a leading protagonist in international film-making. He soon began to back fiction films. In 1907 he lost his cinema concession following a clash with the extraordinarily corrupt minister of justice, Peter Adler Alberti, who had issued a ban on shooting for *Løvejagten*. The films donated by Nordisk Films Kompagni to the first archive are from 1906 to 1912.



Frame from "Kong Christian IX's Bisættelse" / *The Funeral of Christian IX, 1906. Nordisk Films Kompani.*





Frame from "Dr. Cook, Nordpolens Opdager" / Dr. Cook, Discoverer of the Artic Pole" 1909. Carl Th. Dreyer was a journalist before he became film director. Nordisk Films Kompagni.

While Elfelt and Olsen's films in the first film archive are thus part of what we may call a living history of Danish film, it the films donated by Politiken are not. Apart from being shown at various charity benefits, the Historical Film was not part of public awareness. However, it does mean that we have a series of films of direct historical interest and which also show us what people from an influential newspaper considered of lasting value. In the context of newspaper history they also provide an interesting prospect of the hot topics of the day. The images from Copenhagen and the changes the capital underwent during the period were a favourite subject for the press at the time.

THE FILMS AND THEIR HISTORIES

Seen as a whole the 70 films from the first archive are historically interesting and interesting to film historians. They show primarily what people were absorbed by and what people filmed; the way the world looked and what people watched at the cinema or elsewhere.

The films also possess a third dimension. In many of them the presence of the camera is part of the story, we often notice that the people being filmed are aware of the running camera. It is thus obvious that in the earliest film in the archive, *Kongelige Skal Fotograferes* [The Royal Family Has Its Photograph Taken], 1899, the royals are conscious of the camera and the comic potential of the moving image. The same goes for celebrities and the man in the street in later films. Looking at the films from the first film archive one has to ask whether they comprise moving images of an event or moving images of people's reactions to being filmed.

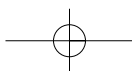
The camera and the film were active elements in contemporary society that drew people's attention and reactions. They did not make films that simply show us the



Frame from "Professor Georg Brandes paa Universitetets Katheder" / Professor Georg Brandes Lectures at the University 1913. The film was taken in a studio. Politiken.



Frame from "Slotsarkitekt Thorvald Jørgensen paa Kristiansborg Slots Stilladser" / Architect Thorvald Jørgensen on the Scaffolding of Kristiansborg Castle, 1913. Politiken.





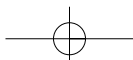
Frame from "Kongelige skal fotograferes"/*The Royal Family has its Photograph taken, 1899. Elfelt.*

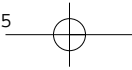


way things were. Nor do we have footage that shows a given historical practice in the context of film history. We see an explicit filmic awareness among the subjects that may seem artless but is by no means naïve. They give as good as they get.

Film was born into an era of great change. The power of the monarchy was giving way to parliamentarism and government by the people. The royal family was used to representative duties but the films of royal personages also go explicitly behind the scenes in many ways. As well as the acting to the camera in *The Royal Family Has Its Photograph Taken* the film "reveals" an occasion as a staged event, such as in *Prinsesse Maries Bisættelse* [Princess Marie's Funeral, 1909], where the camera goes backstage and captures the Royal Guards in a moment of relaxation as well as performing its representative duties. In more than one sense film took representative occasions to the masses, where a subtle interplay between being a spectator and being a participant or between seeing or being seen could be played out. Moreover, the nature of the film wrests the event from its proper location in time and space. We see representations of a representation where different rules applied than would have done so had the occasion taken place unsupervised by the camera.

The arrival of film on the scene was a new sight in several ways: Firstly, the film crew were at work. They continued to do their jobs as events unfolded, unlike the casual spectator who stopped as he went about his business or took his place with respect for the nature of the occasion. Secondly the relatively well-defined delineation of the relationship between protagonist and spectator, between the centre and the periphery of an event, became less defined. Film meant that it was possible not only to see but to be seen, not merely to be present here and now but present on film, i.e. everywhere and for ever. Thirdly, and because of these factors, the camera was itself an object of interest that sometimes even seems to have been a serious competitor to the





event that ought to have been the primary focal point; in turn this makes the spectator act in a more interesting way than usual in order to attract the attention of the camera.

All in all the films are testimony to new ways of looking at things: to being able to see without being seen or to react to given norms, to being seen when one used to be invisible in everyday life, or becoming a protagonist where one used to be at most a walk-on. The films also show this aspect of history, too: A period of turmoil, opportunity and challenge explicitly shown by the choice of subjects for the films and implicitly by the way the subjects react to being filmed. The moving image is a child of the modern age, and inscribed into the individual films, film itself becomes a symbol, a frame of reference, to the people born into this period.

The first archive thus shows us what the world was like, what people saw, how they saw it, how they made themselves seen, how they wanted to be seen, and how much they wanted to be seen. All this is part of a whole gathered into the first Danish film archive; moving images we can look at and which look back at us.



Frame from "Kong Haakons Kroning i Trondhjem" / The Coronation of King Haakon in Trondheim. Nordisk Films Kompagni, 1906.



Frame from "København paa Kryds og Tværs" / A Tour through Copenhagen, Nordisk Films Kompagni, 1907.

NOTES

1. *Den Danske Stats Arkiv for Films og Stemmer*. Det Kgl. Bibliotek. Politiken uden år eller forfatter [Anker Kirkeby, 1914].
2. Yde-Andersen, D.: *Statens Arkiv for Historiske Film og Stemmer in Fortid og Nutid*, Bind XX1. Dansk Historisk Fællesforening. København 1960.
3. Poul Malmkjær: *Gøgler og Generaldirektør. Ole Olsen. Grundlæggeren af Nordisk Film*. Gyldendal. Danmark, 1997.
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Frame from "Prinsesse Mariæ Bisættelse" / The Funeral of Princess Marie. Nordisk Films Kompagni, 1909.

