

*Digital Reception:
Ancient Theatre, Modern Performances, and the
Digitalization of an Audio-Visual Archive**

In our paper, we will present the digitalization project of the audio-visual collection owned by the CRIMTA (*Centro di Ricerca Interdipartimentale Multimediale sul Teatro Antico* - University of Pavia)¹. The project, still in progress, was conceived in autumn 2019 and suffered a setback due to the pandemic. However, this extraordinary context has made its implementation a priority task and the need for preservation and accessibility to such a heritage even more evident².

1. History and presentation of the CRIMTA fund

In 2000 the *Multimedia Interdepartmental Centre for Research on Ancient Theatre* (CRIMTA) was founded at the University of

* Di Stefano wrote paragraphs 1, 3.2 and 3.3; Capra wrote paragraphs 2 and 3.1. Paragraph 4, as well as the project in general, is the result of the joint work of the authors.

¹ <http://crimta.unipv.it>. A new version of the website will be available at <http://centroteatroantico.unipv.it> in the forthcoming months.

² A full-range reflection on digital archiving, with its terminological, philosophical, and social implication, can be found in Edmondson 2016.

Pavia as an outcome of the collaboration between the Department of Classics and the Department of Computer Science and System. Martina Treu, back then a research fellow at the University of Pavia, put forward to collect videos of ancient dramas' contemporary performances, and Diego Lanza and Anna Beltrametti welcomed it with great interest. The main objective of the Centre is to support the study of ancient theatre and its reception. We believe in the importance of a fruitful relationship between the research on philological and literary aspects of ancient theatrical texts and the performances recorded by videos³.

The fund has initially been acquired through two sources. Firstly, the Centre collected videotapes owned by different members of the CRIMTA. Martina Treu then encouraged donations from the producing theatres. In the following years, the fund has been expanded with new DVDs, including the INDA performances in Syracuse.

In collaboration with the IT department, Martina Treu promoted further initiatives: she designed a website for the Centre and created an online database. She conceived the architecture of the database and, as a field specialist, she was able to provide an accurate description of the study object. Computer scientists from the Artificial Vision Laboratory, led by Virginio Cantoni, worked on the technical implementation of the website and the database, while some former Engineering students under the supervision of Roberto Marmo collaborated on the project. Over the years, the site has been the principal information source on the Centre activities and has provided access to the database. This platform allows to consult the catalogue of audio-visual items and intends to meet the needs of scholars and students of ancient theatre, theatre operators and a wider audience, such as secondary school teachers. The database also provides users with useful information through the repertoires linked to the catalogue: biographical and bibliographic data of the authors of ancient and modern

³ For further information about the birth of the Centre, see Caneva-Massa 2010.

texts, dates and places of performances, information on people and media of technical shooting.

Over the years, accessibility to the fund has undergone some changes. Initially, the Centre lent the DVDs to accredited private users or institutions, especially schools. However, there was no computerized lending-borrowing procedure, such as the one that the University librarian system was implementing. Therefore, the CRIMTA Technical Scientific Committee and its director decided to restrict access and authorize archive visits only by appointment⁴. As we will see, the reduced accessibility to the collection has been one of the reasons that led us to think about the need for digitization of the audio-visual items and their inclusion in the University library system.

2. Present status of the fund

The Centre owns a multimedia archive of significant importance, including about a hundred audio-visual reproductions of Italian and foreign performances of ancient plays or modern ones variously connected to their reception; the archive covers the period from the middle of the 20th century to the very last years. Consistently with the founders' main interests, the most represented authors are Euripides and Aeschylus: our catalogue allows, for instance, comparison between 16 partial or total versions of the *Oresteia*. Sophocles is also well represented, without neglecting Greek and Latin comedy (Aristophanes, Menander, Plautus) and Senecan tragedy, whose study is particularly vital at the University of Pavia.

The archive hosts some works by renowned Italian and foreign directors such as Ingmar Bergman, Elio De Capitani, Peter Hall, Luca Ronconi, Peter Stein, Theodoros Terzopoulos, Lars Von Trier; moreover, through the Centre's items, it is possible to follow various paths of reception, up to excellent examples of theatrical restaging in high schools. Films, documentaries, and archi-

⁴ Anna Beltrametti is the current director of the Centre.

val items variously connected to the reception of ancient dramas also enrich the fund, and foster a truly horizon-broadening collection by enabling interaction between ancient and modern and by combining philological speculation, sense of performance, and projection to the future.

In addition to the audio-visual items, a librarian fund enhances the research experience at the Centre. This collection was donated to the CRIMTA by the family of the late prominent scholar, translator, and dramatist Umberto Albini (1923-2011)⁵ and has about four thousand texts, from ancient Greek and Latin authors to modern European literature and philosophy. Many books are provided with precious working annotations and traces of a complex network of friendship and collaborations with scholars of all Europe. The Centre is currently cataloguing the fund, in order to grant access to a broader public. Albini collection's records are merging into the National Librarian Catalogue (OPAC_SBN), making it available not only to the academic community of Pavia but to scholars, researchers, and students of the whole country⁶. The same ambition to wide-ranging accessibility to information and items inspires our digitalization project.

3. *Preservation and accessibility*

3.1. *From material to digital support*

In October 2019, the Centre began to discuss the digitization of its assets⁷. A twofold concern underlies this initiative: preser-

⁵ For a profile of Albini's work and legacy, see the issue of *Stratagemmi* dedicated to his posthumous translation of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*, especially Albini 2017, Beltrametti 2017 and Treu 2017.

⁶ For the Albini librarian fund see [https://openweb.unipv.it/openweb/PAV0UT/#!cerca?f\[t800h\]\[\]=Albini.Umberto](https://openweb.unipv.it/openweb/PAV0UT/#!cerca?f[t800h][]=Albini.Umberto) (last visit on 2021-03-07). For our presence on the National Catalogue see <https://www.iccu.sbn.it/it/SBN/poli-e-biblioteche/polo/PAV-Polo-Universita-degli-studi-di-Pavia/> (last visit on 2021-03-07).

⁷ Digitalization and digitization are two distinct processes. While the latter consists in simply transferring analogue objects from a physical support into

vation and access. On the one hand, there is a technical need to preserve the fund, which otherwise risks deteriorating, with the loss of valuable resources; on the other hand, the digitization would allow greater accessibility to documents, something that has lately proved to be crucial.

The concern about the fragility of the material supports is not a new issue: about ten years ago, with the collaboration of some students, the Centre transferred the videos from VHS to DVD. However, while the magnetic tapes of VHSs last for decades, the deterioration of CDs and DVDs is much faster. Indeed, technological obsolescence has been and is one of the main problems of all audio-visual archives and, in addition to the obsolescence of material supports, the players themselves experience deterioration.

Beside ensuring preservation, a digital archive such as the one we intend to implement would respond to the fundamental need for the usability of content by a diverse and widest possible audience. Indeed, since 1986 – when the famous article by Richard O. Mason⁸ was published – the accessibility of content has been acknowledged as one of the four fundamental ethical challenges in the information age⁹ and it is also one of the primary ideological presuppositions underlying the spread of the Internet.

In our case, a digital transformation would broaden the limits of reception, today bound to very few spaces and times, necessarily in person and strictly controlled. The very nature of material support proves to be an obstacle both to the needs of scientific and dramaturgical research and of a broader audience. Scholars of reception and theatre operators require repeated and thoughtful watching. At the same time, a broader and generic

a digital one, digitalization is a more complex action, turning the digital object into a cognitive resource. Our goal is twofold: we aim in the first place at preserving our fund from deterioration, but we also wish to provide a powerful tool of inquiry for students and scholars of ancient theatre. We will exploit the potential of *Digital Library Pavia* to accomplish this second objective.

⁸ Mason 1986.

⁹ Mason identified four areas arousing ethical issues in the information age: privacy, accuracy, property, and accessibility, also known as PAPA factors.

audience could be interested in approaching the fund out of curiosity, by randomly exploring it and by watching modern performances of ancient dramas. This generic audience could often perceive archives as “closed” environments, only accessible to scholars. Geographical distance could also be an obstacle for a non-academic audience, not driven by professional needs. With its aftermath of distrust in physical travel and a new awareness about the potential of virtual venues, the pandemic has only strengthened our belief that a change in this sense was urgent.

3.2. The Digital Library project of the University of Pavia and the DSpace-Glam platform

While evaluating the feasibility and costs of our project, the Centre looked for inspiration and advice to other similar initiatives at the University of Pavia, such as *PAD-Pavia Digital Archives* of the ‘Maria Corti’ Manuscript Centre. During these informal exchanges, Gabriele Rossini, back then chief librarian at the *Digital Library Pavia*¹⁰, suggested integrating the CRIMTA’s project into the new platform¹¹.

The platform hosting *Digital Library Pavia* is *DSpace-GLAM* by 4Science, a digital venue for libraries, museums, archives, and galleries. *Digital Library Pavia* hosts a various range of resources from different periods, ancient documents and native digital resources, images, and audios; the CRIMTA’s items will be the first audio-visual collection to merge into it.

This platform offers several benefits. First, *DSpace-GLAM* is open source and therefore the software can be constantly adapted and implemented, preventing the obsolescence that analogue media experience. It is also able to manage different types of metadata, in line with international standards, and especially

¹⁰ The *Digital Library Pavia* was inaugurated on January 13th, 2021 and it is available at <https://www.bibliotecadigitale.unipv.eu>

¹¹ For the main features of this project and its current state, see <http://digitlib.unipv.it/eng/project.html> (last visit on 2021-03-21).

structural metadata, describing both the relationship between various objects of the archive and between parts of the same object: as we will see, this could prove to be particularly important for an archive like ours.

A further advantage of this platform is the data exposure on the web. Thanks to the application of SEO techniques, digital items enjoy excellent visibility on the web, while persistent identifiers (Handle, DOI) facilitate sharing of resources and publishing according to the standard of Linked Open Data. All these features, as well as the merge with the University's OPAC, will make the digital archive more accessible.

However, an important question arises: how does the Centre intend to balance between the scientific and public need to access content and the ethical, as well as legal, imperative to protect copyright and intellectual property?¹² Even before the idea of digitizing the CRIMTA fund, these problems were at the centre of numerous meetings of the Technical Scientific Committee. With the *DSpace-GLAM* platform, however, this problem can be ruled out. This platform allows to modulate access to copyrighted items. In the process of digitizing the fund, the Centre will evaluate which resources will be accessible without restriction and which will require an authorization. In this last scenario, the CRIMTA staff foresees two options: either the video will be watched in person, restoring on-site consultation, or users will be granted with remote temporary access.

A further solution for copyrighted items could consist in providing selected files and clips, following the example of the MIT *Global Shakespeares* project. This option would help create what Alexander Huang called a "performance-intensive" video environment¹³. Our goal is to provide each restricted object with a clip, but this solution will be fully evaluated after completing digitization.

¹² Mason 1986, p. 10, highlights the complexity of this issue.

¹³ Huang 2011, p. 248. For the project see the official website: <https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/> (last visit on 2021-02-14).

3.3. Digitization, description, segmentation

In November 2020, a formal meeting sanctioned the merge of the CRIMTA fund into the Digital Library. Before getting included in the *Digital Library Pavia*, the items need to be digitized and transferred to the University servers for storage and preservation. Since then, two steps have been taken to launch this phase of the project: the application to a regional call for technological upgrade and a work-study program financed by the Humanities Department. During the pandemic, the Lombardy Region allocated significant funding for digital innovation and remote learning. The University of Pavia received 4.008.560 euros and our Centre had the chance to upgrade its technological equipment. These new devices contribute to facilitate the process of digitization. Moreover, in the academic year 2020/2021 two Classics students, Beatrice Milanesi and Alfredo Tosques, were appointed to our work-study program. They started cataloguing the Albini fund and arranging the preliminary operations for digitalization. In collaboration with the *Polo EasyCat Pavia*, the local section of the National Catalogue, and under the supervision of Matteo Ferrari, they created the cataloguing scheme and catalogued almost all volumes on ancient authors. In the academic year 2021/2022 we intend to complete cataloguing the Albini collection and to digitize the CRIMTA fund with the aid of two new trainee students. Indeed, work-study programs provide valuable help: similar projects at the University libraries have shown that this option is not only beneficial to students' training in entry-level jobs in the field of cultural heritage. It can also provide added value to projects that directly affect the services at university, by disseminating information and curiosity among younger users.

A further step will be to describe the items and to produce useful metadata for the integration in the *Digital Library Pavia*. Although the collaboration with the *Digital Library Pavia* suffered a setback due to the pandemic, the long-term goal of our project remains an actual digitalization: creating an archive

equipped with metadata. The metadata will be able not only to describe objects, but to relate them to each other.

For this reason, a fundamental step in building our digital audio-visual archive will be segmentation¹⁴. Segmentation consists in dividing an individual audio-visual document into homogeneous subsets. This segmentation does not necessarily correspond to a sequence in the technical sense; in the case of performances of ancient dramas it could, for instance, indicate structural elements (*parodo*, *episodes*, *stasima*, *parabaseis*). Applying this kind of segmentation to our objects will create a visible representation of the structure of ancient tragedies and comedies. It will arise awareness on how the original partitions and dramatic elements are transferred into modern theatre and will draw attention to such partitions for a deep understanding of the ancient text; it will also facilitate comparing different actualizations of the same structural element with respect to one specific drama.

4. *Making digital reception alive*

As we have seen, the simple conversion of items into digital format (*digitization*) is only one aspect of the digitalization process of an audio-visual fund. Transforming digital copies into an actual archive and creating a cognitive resource will require other initiatives. Indeed, it will be necessary to carry out segmentation and description operations to build relationships between the various objects.

A multimedia archive of performances could offer a precious insight about ancient theatre. Such an archive is the last ring in a fascinating chain. Along this path the first moment was the ancient performance, within which the text represents only one aspect, however essential, of the show. Therefore our experience of ancient drama is always partial, since we lack music, costumes, and choreography. From the ancient theatre all we have left is the text. The modern staging starts from the text but inherits cen-

¹⁴ Stockinger 2012, pp. 33-48.

turies of theatrical experience and brings along with it stratified stage knowledge: thanks to this, it often illuminates the features and nuances of the ancient dramatic text differently from the outcomes of the philological approach¹⁵. From the text to a new theatrical staging, then.

The transformation of the stage production into a multimedia file and its arrangement in a digital archive is a further deviation, as it creates a relationship with the performance that is different from the original context. It is, indeed, a separate, ongoing, reproducible relationship¹⁶, which is detached from the original situation; it also lacks the experience of the physical place and the link with the audience¹⁷. This new relationship is not only influenced by the technological medium but also by the academic frame. Like all the previous passages, this step is never neutral: it brings with it a diversity of experience that affects the interpretation. Those who design the archive are then responsible for reflecting on the influence of their choices, both on technological issues and on the organization of contents. This involves audiovisual quality and accessibility, but also interpretative problems, such as authorial attribution, segmentation, searching and browsing options.

Reflecting on digital archives and their organization is a fundamental step in laying the groundwork for digital reception. However, a digital archive alone cannot create a 'lively' digital reception of ancient theatre. Indeed, the pandemic months have proved the central role of universities, archives, and libraries as

¹⁵ As Foley 1999, p. 10, puts it: «Modern performances have much to teach us. Artists provide important critical responses to Greek drama from a variety of perspectives not always available in the academy». See Taplin 2002; Con-dello 2013, pp. 22-30.

¹⁶ Something very different from the «temporal tyranny to the book form [...] one damned thing after another, from top to bottom and left to right», as Bowker 2020 p. 98 put it (citing Eisenstein 1979).

¹⁷ For the importance of social and political context in restaging ancient texts Bierl 2004 (*Oresteia*) is ground-breaking. See also Fragkou 2015 (*Prometheus Bound*).

places of organization and production of knowledge. In the past, the CRIMTA carried out many projects with theatre operators or secondary school teachers: most of them started from informal exchanges with people visiting the archive in order to borrow or watch a specific document. Therefore, dematerializing an archive must go hand in hand with rethinking the interaction with users; those precious moments of exchange should not disappear.

For this reason, the Centre is now radically rethinking the CRIMTA website and revitalizing its activities. Besides its annual seminar, we intend to promote initiatives for high school students, such as translation workshops of ancient dramas and dissemination of old and recent restaging. The idea is to create both in-presence and remote events, which may bring a distant and/or more generic audience closer to the heritage of the archive: an authentic wealth, often unfortunately still underestimated, for all our studies.

Abstract.

In 2000 the CRIMTA (*Centro di Ricerca Interdipartimentale Multimediale sul Teatro Antico*) was founded at the University of Pavia. Besides promoting various research activities and publications, the Centre owns an audiovisual fund with near a hundred videos of performances and films inspired by ancient dramas. In recent years, the CRIMTA fund has ensured the possibility to consult the videos for both academic and didactic purposes. A composite audience (researchers, teachers, theatre professionals) was thus able to access a valuable collection of materials that are often difficult to find.

From its foundation, however, the role of archives has changed and must deal with the needs of an increasingly international research landscape, as well as with new teaching tools and strategies. Since October 2019, the CRIMTA has been reflecting on the digitization of its holdings. With our paper, we want to illustrate the actions that will lead to the creation of a digital version of the CRIMTA archive. This initiative will be possible in collaboration with the *Digital Library Project* of the University of Pavia, which is providing for the digitization of some funds from the Pavia libraries. The objective of this initiative is twofold: conservation and access. On the one hand, there is a technical need to preserve the fund, which, otherwise, risks deteriorating and being lost; on the other hand, the digitization would allow greater accessibil-

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ity of documents, a need which, during the recent sanitary emergence, has become central.

The paper will also provide an opportunity to reflect on the advantages of a digital archive for the performances of ancient dramas, in terms of accessibility and usability, but also some difficulties and limits, not only technical, of such a project.

Keywords.

Ancient theatre, digital archives, audio-visual archives, classical reception, modern performances.

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