Digital Humanities in the India Rim

Contemporary Scholarship in Australia and India

Hart Cohen   Ujjwal Jana   Myra Gurney

Cover concept by Thalan-Harry Cowlishaw, designed using original image provided by Freepic, https://www.freepik.com, CC BY-NC

Cover design by Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

16. The digital mediation of film archives from the Strehlow Research Centre

Hart Cohen

Abstract

This chapter is concerned with the history of the Strehlow Research Centre (SRC) with a special emphasis on the how the film collection has been handled at various points in the institution's history. As an archive and research centre, the SRC has evolved from an earlier series of controversies around cultural ownership to become a leading innovator of the digitisation of parts of its collection. The digitisation of the films of T.G.H. Strehlow have led the collecting institutions sector, not only in technological innovation but also in outreach and engagement with its Aboriginal constituency. The example of the Strehlow Film Collection, and its evolution as a database and focus for community engagement, resonate with the issues that have recently emerged around archive/counter archive projects and participatory archives (Huvila) which have re-capitulated the role of archives in recovering the space of cultural memory and cultural practice. The chapter will test the proposition that "[…] the archive as a site for creative intervention, is one that enables new possibilities for preserving and representing individual memory within a larger historical consciousness" (Kashmere, 2021).

Introduction

The Strehlow Collection is an archive composed mainly of works collected and created by the Australian anthropologist and linguist T.G.H. Strehlow in relation to Aboriginal people of Central Australia. While the archive includes multiple media and artefacts, my research has focused on 16mm ceremonial footage Strehlow filmed during the period from 1935–1970. My encounter with this film archive, which was orphaned for many years, was respectfully to catalogue these film works and to re-mediate footage fit for public viewing to tell multiple stories in an episodic mode as a biographic landscape. The result of this work culminated in the broadcast film, *Mr Strehlow's Films* (2001), for the Australian-based Special Broadcasting Service (SBS).

This archival film collection relocates cultural memory and, as ceremonial footage, still contains within it the traces of what Dick Kimber describes as:

> [...] images [...] which were themselves imbued with the spirit of the actors and the ancestors and therefore took on the secret-sacred element about them that goes above and beyond our conventional concepts of film [...]" (Kimber in Cohen, 2001).

This relates to the idea of the "anarchival materiality" of the archive (Hennessy & Smith, 2022) where the archive points to unusual and unpredictable challenges to re-mediation, especially where the work differs substantially from the context in which the archival material was first filmed.

Strehlow's ceremonial film archive is held at the Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs, Northern Territory and is closed to public viewing. Over time, its digital re-inscription and re-curation has made it available to those Aboriginal people who have legitimate cultural connections to its spiritual significance. This chapter is concerned with connecting this film collection with the issues that have recently emerged around archive/counter archive projects and participatory archives (see I. Huvila (2011) What are Participatory Archives? For Real?) which have

re-capitulated the role of archives in recovering the space of cultural memory. The chapter will test the proposition that "[...] the archive as a site for creative intervention, is one that enables new possibilities for preserving and representing individual memory within a larger historical consciousness" (Kashmere, 2021).

The Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs 1991–2023

The Strehlow Research Centre (SRC) has seen several transformations in the period of its own history as an institution. I use a decadal approach to offer a review of these transformations in relation to how parts of the collection intersected with its programmatic interest in the relationship between digital technologies and the collection as a public resource. The periods I propose are: 1991 (founding) to 2001; 2001–2011 and 2011 to the present.

As an archive or 'keeping place' it was, from its inception, confronted with questions of its validity as an archive. As Brett Galt Smith, the SRC's second Managing Director later wrote:

> The Strehlow Research Centre was not a popular institution in which to work from its opening in 1991. It had many local critics including Central Australian Aboriginal people and land councils (Galt Smith, 2015).

While the materials under its care range from documents to media, the most important and concerning materials are the several hundred objects or Tjurunga (Chirunga) collected by Ted Strehlow during his period of working in Central Australia. These objects have been the most contentious of what has been collected and then sequestered at the archive. The protests from the Central Land Council at the opening of the SRC were highly motivated by the presence of these objects in a place, the Strehlow Research Centre, that was considered in 1991 as inappropriate, as they belonged to Aboriginal people.

An ABC news program covered the intervention at the opening of the SRC in 1991. An on-camera speech was made by the then-Chair of the Central Land Council, Rupert (Maxie) Stuart, in which he invoked the desire to see and touch objects that he was connected to as part of his Aboriginal spiritual identity and protested against its sequestration in

the SRC archive (see Cohen, 2001). The dispute around this disconnect, in which the archive removes access for its most important constituents, was somewhat softened 10 years later when the same person—Stuart— agreed that perhaps the SRC was the place for where these objects could be best protected (Cohen, 2001). There has been an illegal trade in these sacred objects and, understanding this, perhaps, for Stuart, the SRC became the lesser of two evils. There is a continuing persistence in the potential problems that these objects can cause, because they remain powerful things that can by their very presence cause havoc and even death if not treated with care.

In moving beyond the first decade of the SRC's existence as an archive, some important changes occurred in both the nature of how the collection was managed and how it presented itself to the public. As Galt Smith wrote:

> By 2002 the SRC had become well and truly open for business with requests from Aboriginal men to store their sacred objects for safe keeping; regular visits by Aboriginal people to view objects, films and photographs and to listen to sound recordings... Dr Mike Smith of the National Museum of Australia described as its transformation (in museum terms) from 'a kind of North Korea to a Switzerland' (Galt Smith, 2015).

This attribution does capture the challenges posed to the SRC in its early days and its subsequent emergence as a focus for outreach to its Aboriginal constituents. In its second decade, the SRC introduced repatriation in a policy revision of earlier legislation, re-invigorated the Board of the SRC by adding Aboriginal members, and hired Aboriginal people in research assistant positions. The latter showed immediate results, with renewed efforts to digitise more of the collection's media resources, expanding the database for a catalogue to these resources across a greater range of media (including sound) and links to documentation, much of it Ted and Carl Strehlow's work on genealogies and word lists.

The eventual appointment of a woman (Felicity Greene) to act as Director of the SRC addressed the issue of gender bias, given that the collection was mostly (but not exclusively) an archive of cultural ceremony (films, photographs and objects) to do with men or to what is sometimes referred to as 'men's business'. The appointment showed that with flexibility and careful planning, the gender restrictions could

be respected with a female chief administrator. However, it was through a greater Aboriginal presence in research that the outreach to Aboriginal elders and traditional custodians increased contact and engagement with this important group. In its third decade, the SRC moved to employing Aboriginal people in both research and administrative roles in relation to the collection.

Digitising the collection

Cutting across the SRC's emergence as an archive and research centre is the history of its collection as an archive. When I first visited the SRC in 1995, the work on transforming the collection into an archive was only in its early phases. The priority was given to ensuring the objects were safely and securely stored; a number of Strehlow's written materials including diaries and letters were also worked on. The film collection had gone through a form of preservation through the copying of films onto 1-inch video and ½-inch video tape. There was no catalogue to the film at this point, though the original 16 mm film itself was held in vaults at the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) in Canberra.

The late 1990s saw the emergence of a number of collecting institutions turn to what was then new media technology—specifically digitisation—as a means of preserving the materials, offering greater access as computing expanded to personalised computers. It was in this period that the SRC first opted to digitise the film collection with the assistance of the NFSA. At the same time, an Australian Research Council funded a project developed by the then University of Western Sydney (now Western Sydney University) in partnership with the SRC to catalogue the film material. This first catalogue was published in 2003 as "The Filmworks of TGH Stehlow 1935–1962" and notes:

> The listing is based largely on Strehlow's annotations that he maintained as part of his field diaries in relation to the films. The document lists the year in which the films were shot, a time-coded index and a brief description of the film's content. The time code follow the format given to it by Screensound (now the NFSA) when it copied the material from the original 16mm to 1-inch video. This listing is now searchable to a new Digital Video copy of the films with the assistance of Screensound for the Strehlow Research Centre (Cohen, 2003).

By way of an example of the catalogue's approach to listing the video the following is excerpted:

Timecode	Designation	Year	Initials	Number
0:1:10	Video Reel 1	1935	TGHS	NO 1A
Strehlow Collection 1935 Reel 1 of 2 ID NO 55966				
0:01:10	Video Reel 1	1935	TGHS	No 1A
0:01:23	Todd in Flood. Aboriginal girls playing in and near the flowing water.			

Fig. 16.1 Excerpt from catalogue

This catalogue resulted from the first digitisation of this film collection, albeit one that was 'orphaned' in that no access had been granted to view these films for decades. Further, it was one of the first times a collecting institution in Australia digitised a part of its collection, and represents an early example of Humanities Computing or what we now refer to as the Digital Humanities.

In this early period of digitisation, collecting institutions were quickly developing the means to not only re-record the materials in digital formats but to also develop databases through which media resources collected could be accessed online. Some of the most prolific of these initiatives included Paradisec (https://www.paradisec.org.au/) which focused on Indigenous archives, Ara Irititja (https://irititja.com/), and Our Stories (https://lant.nt.gov.au/) which focused on the media and other sources first at Ernabella, SA, then at Darwin's Northern Territory Library Service.

2001–2011

In the decade (2001–2011) following the publication of the catalogue, more access was given to traditional custodians to the films at the SRC but, in most instances, access to view the films could only be arranged as on-site viewings as few people had the technical and material means to access these films online. Further, there was some anxiety around the insecurity of online presentations of Aboriginal cultural material especially in the context of restricted or culturally sensitive information.

The emergent technical capacity to protect these sites was a work in progress in conjunction with those interested in testing the boundaries of security for sometimes nefarious reasons. These concerns and the responses to them pre-empted our contemporary digital landscape where insecure data storage has shown to be vulnerable with devastating consequences.

In this decade, mainly under the direction of Brett Galt Smith, the SRC was more active in outreach activities to its Aboriginal constituents and especially open to researchers seeking to work with the collection. It was this decade that saw the emergence of Barry Hill's biography (2002), my own documentaries (*Mr Strehlow's Films*, 2001; *Cantata Journey*, 2006) and database extending the book, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* to a digital scholarly edition. Gordon Williams and Andrew Schultz' *Cantata, Journey to Horseshoe Bend* (2003) and Diane Austin-Broos's monograph, *Arrernte Present, Arrernte Past* (2009). By 2011, several research collaborations and these creative and academic works presented the life and work of the Strehlows (Carl and T.G.H.) and Arrernte cultural history to both Australian and international publics. This decade also saw the exponential growth of digital technologies, especially in how information circulated on the Internet and via social media on mobile phones.

2011–present

In the decade from 2011–2023, some important shifts occurred in the SRC's sense of how Aboriginal people would participate in the archives—both as users of the archive and for those employed in support of the archive.

The next phase of digitisation brought the film and other media parts of the collection into a mature Digital-Humanities-style database. Shaun Angeles, a Norther Arrernte man from Yambe, was working as a research assistant as this third decade at the SRC got underway. As part of the film project, *Ntaria Heroes*, Shaun was one of the cinematographers and more importantly was a strong voice as an interviewee throughout the film. *Ntaria Heroes* was conceived as a participatory archives project in the manner defined by Histo Ivula as:

> [...] decentralising curation, radical orientation towards users and

contextualisation of records and the entire archival process [...] (Ivula, 2021).

A summary of the film as indicated by the title is provided by the anthropologist at the SRC, Adam Macfie:

> In many ways what we are calling [...] Heroes in the title of this film are those people who worked with the Strehlows in order to have their culture documented with the intention of to have it preserved and looked after [...] that is why we have called them 'heroes' [...] (Macfie in Cohen, 2018, p. 128).

Shaun Angeles in an interview also offered a sense of the impact the project had on the youth who were invited to access the SRC archives, especially the genealogies and still photographs through which they were able to identify relatives and become familiar with skin names and skin groups, including their own skin names (new to this group of young people).

> The last few weeks we've had school students from Ntaria School come in to have a look [at] the material—some of the material—the appropriate material from the Strehlow Research Centre. They have been coming in looking at genealogies and looking at old photographs and it has been powerful for them and even for us [...] (Angeles in Cohen, 2016, p. 128).

The film documents how the project fostered a relationship with the Ntaria School through mentoring and engaging students in filmmaking. Here the use of mobile phones and iPads were already ubiquitous among young people, and their use facilitated the various creative inputs made by the students. In a sense, this project and its extension to a film was intent on marrying the SRC's archival materials—especially its world-class collection of genealogical information and photographs—with the cultural knowledge objectives of the School and Aboriginal community. As cultural research of this kind often privileges the past and cultural traditions, for young people the new media technologies allowed the connections to these traditions to appear new and engaging. For this reason, this project far exceeded the conventional relationships in the context of a collections institution and moved to a more intense level of participation in the SRC archive than had hitherto been the case.

As Shaun Angeles put it:

> The work that we do here and the power of the material here [and how it] can change young people's lives for the better [...] We need to be urgent with this. We need to do as much as we can with young people now while their elders are still around [...] there is still lots of knowledge out there with our old people; knowledges, sacred site, songlines, songs, ceremonies are still going today [...] (Angeles in Cohen, 2016, p. 129).

Here, Shaun is explicit about how he felt the cultural knowledge so essential for a young person's Aboriginal identity and well-being was being lost. As he noted early in our interactions with these young people, most of them did not know their skin names, which moved Shaun to ask rhetorically, "Is this the first generation of Aboriginal people who will not know who they are?" He goes on:

> We still feel it now, when we go to a ceremony or when we sit down with old people and they start singing a song; it hits you, it fills you up, it gives you goosebumps, it makes you cry. And this is the power of this stuff (Angeles in Cohen, 2016. p. 129).

This is Shaun's most emphatic plea for the continuation of this process of engagement with the Aboriginal constituents—especially the traditional custodians of the SRC archive. It is not surprising then that Shaun is at the forefront of an expansion of the SRC's media archive database.

Working with the source materials of film, but expanding to still images, Shaun built a much more expansive database to serve the demands of the Strehlow Collection. Moreover, Shaun developed this work in close consultation with elders, some of whom visited the SRC, but others were contacted on field trips. Visiting the country and meeting the elders was something Shaun always spoke of as "a great privilege" and, using laptops, he was able to glean a surfeit of information about the media resources he was attempting to document.

In an email sent to me in 2021, Shaun summarises his approach:

> The editing process involved cross referencing the catalogue you produced, Strehlow's ceremonial film scripts and the field diaries. From this I developed a searchable spreadsheet that collates a broad cross section of data associated with these performances such as:

> Celebrated totemic ancestor.

> Animal or plant species and/or element (Fire, water, wind Associated site(s).

Performers.

Owners of acts.

People who revealed acts.

Associated SRC secret sacred objects, ceremonial songs and photographs (Angeles, 2021, personal communication).

He goes on to describe the impact of this new stage of database development:

> This work not only made sense of the ceremonial film but began to consolidate large sections of the collection by linking the different cultural assets within it. We are effectively re-piecing the collection together how it was originally recorded by using the film as a reference point.

The point here is that what was considered a marginal feature of the collection, the films shot by Strehlow over 35 years, have become the resource upon which a comprehensive database of the whole collection with its multiple connections is made. In an account of one of the key performers who worked closely and frequently with Strehlow, Shaun provides an in-depth description of how this person is seen today. It is this attention to the elders who worked with Strehlow, whom we named "Ntaria Heroes" that Shaun sees as the key to the survival of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and cultural practices and, by extension, the next generation of Aboriginal people.

> Quantifying this data has taught us many things about the visionary men who co-created this collection, particularly their profound contribution and dedication to this unique record. For example, we see that Sidi Ross was the primary actor in over sixty acts which span six language groups across Central Australia over a fifteen-year period from 1950 –1965. Or Lockey Tjituma, the primary actor in over seventy acts spanning eight language groups over a thirty-year period working with Strehlow. Lockey first enters the record in 1933 at Horseshoe Bend and the last moving imagery of him is in 1965 on the Goyder River where he is still performing ceremonies as an elderly man (Angeles, 2021, personal communication).

This is valuable information that has never been available and is now brought to light in the context of this recent phase of database development. It suggests that the further development of an archive's

resources in relation to the affordances of new media technologies opens up important information and knowledge about the archive's historical foundations, including, in this instance, the extensive participation of Aboriginal informants for T.G.H. Strehlow's ceremonial films. It is to Shaun Angeles that credit should flow for underpinning his technological achievements in the archive with the participation of traditional custodians to both assist with the task and offer cultural legitimacy to this important heritage-preserving work.

Even as the work expanded the known ceremonies and song cycles, Shaun pointed out how the process also identified missing materials which were eventually found. From this, we can see how the process added to the collection because of the work that had proceeded to take place:

> Through this process we were able to identify missing acts which were subsequently found while conducting research at the NFSA. This ceremonial footage was from 1949/50 at the Iltirapota Festival and for some unknown reason wasn't in the SRC collection. This particular footage taught us more about the different ceremonial classifications within the films. At Iltirapota we see a number of performances where women and children are present which is contrary to the common narrative around the collection being strictly a men's only ceremonial collection. This find opens other opportunities in the way we work with the archive.

With Shaun's work, the edited films are becoming a wonderful resource for traditional owners. Senior elders are using them as a teaching tool that is nurturing intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge by allowing the younger generation of men to view these films. Some men are able to see their fathers and grandfathers performing in the films, which often provokes emotions, memories and thought. The films inspire men to revitalise ceremonies that have not been performed for generations. Shaun has also indicated that consolidating the film catalogue has now led us to work with the ceremonial sound recordings. This component of the collection has been completely absent from any earlier catalogue work or digitisation as it was simply too difficult, however, the work on sound is now yielding results. The holy grail of synchronising the film with the correct songs is now within reach.

Recent developments in the SRC's digitisation program

The Museum and Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) and the SRC have collaborated with the NFSA to re-digitise the entire AV collection. The NFSA have begun with the film catalogue and copies of this important footage are now available in 4K. To further the achievements of the last few years, an on-country digital studio has been built in Alice Springs to allow traditional owners to access the files. This facility is intended to encourage the intergenerational transfer of knowledge. One of the potential consequences of this focus on the films is the re-awakening of Aboriginal languages long repressed by the colonialisation of Aboriginal people, assimilation policies, and official government policy prohibiting the use of Aboriginal language in public institutions.

The re-digitisation involved the National Film and Sound Archive's resources, once again with protocols that carefully laid out who could work on the digitisation process accompanied by consultations with senior men from the community assisting with this process. As indicated by Gil Moody:

> Those men were given the authority by the senior men from up here to be able to view or touch any of the items and hear any of the material (in Allison, 2023).

These senior men had travelled to Canberra to advise on the development of a set of protocols to ensure the materials were handled and stored in a culturally safe manner. Two restricted preservation areas were also established, limiting access to staff who had been approved by senior community men to view and handle the content (Allison, 2023).

The process is thought to be world-leading in developing protocols and processes for digitising culturally sensitive films. Out of this process has also arisen training opportunities and a concerted approach to having men local to where the SRC is located trained in audio-visual conservation, preservation, digitisation and archiving.

The proposition that "[…] the archive as a site for creative intervention, is one that enables new possibilities for preserving and representing individual memory within a larger historical consciousness" (Kashmere, 2021) is redolent of the SRC's contemporary moves in digitising its archive, in promoting Aboriginal participation in this digital renewal of

its core films and doing so in a manner that respects cultural authority and traditional custodianship of culture and country.

Works Cited

Allison, C. (2023, April 28). On-country studio to give Alice Springs traditional owners access to Strehlow Collection. *ABC News*. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-04-28/strehlow-collection-returned-to-central-australia/102271640

Austin-Broos, D. (2009). *Arrernte Present, Arrernte Past: Invasion, Violence and Imagination in Indigenous Central Australia*. University of Chicago Press. https://www.doi.org/10.1017/S0010417510000538

Cohen, H. (2018). *The Strehlow Archive: Explorations in old and new media*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315145464

Cohen, H. (2003). *The Filmworks of TGH Strehlow 1935–1962*. Northern Territory Government.

Galt Smith, B. (2015, October 30). Journey as vehicle–Journey to Horseshoe Bend: The Trojan horse in Strehlovian politics. Paper delivered at Symposium, *Journey to Horseshoe Bend: The Replication of an Australian Classic*. State Library of NSW, Sydney.

Hennessy, K. & Smith, T.L. (2022, April 27). Anarchival Materiality in Film Archives. Description of online presentation hosted by the *Royal Anthropological Institute* (*RAI*) included in *RAI* email of events.

Hill, B. (2002). *Broken song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal possession*. Random House.

Huvila, I. (2011). What is participatory archives? For real? https://www.istohuvila.se/what-participatory-archive-real

Kashmere, B. (n.d.). Cache rules everything around me: Introduction to Issue #2: Counter-Archive. *Incite!* http://www.incite-online.net/intro2.html

Mundine, D. (2021). Remembering and forgetting: Forgiveness and not forgetting. Counter-monuments Symposium Session 3. Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. https://acca.melbourne/program/counter-monuments-session-three/

Thorsen, S. (2020). Counter-archiving: Combating data colonialism. Medium. https://medium.com/copenhagen-institute-for-futures-studies/counter-archiving-combating-data-colonialism-be17ffead4

Williams, G., & Schultz, A. (2003). *Journey to Horseshoe Bend Cantata*. ABC Classics.

Films [All films available through VIMEO]

Cohen, H. (2001). Mr Strehlow's Films, Journocam Productions. SBSI. https://vimeo.com/177383620

Cohen, H. (2006). Cantata Journey, Research Decisions, Australian Broadcasting Corporation. https://vimeo.com/177298769

Cohen, H., Morley, R., & Salazar, J.F. (2016). Ntaria Heroes, ARC/SRC. https://vimeo.com/206014019