

Exploring the Soviet Ukrainian Cinematographer's Private Photo Archive: Issues of Popularization and Representation



Istraživanje
privatne fotoarhive sovjetsko-
ukrajinskog filmskog
snimatelja: pitanja
popularizacije i reprezentacije

STRUČNI TEKST

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SAŽETAK

Arhiva poznatoga sovjetsko-ukrajinskog snimatelja Leonida Burlake primjer je fotografije koja ilustrira različite sfere života u Ukrajini od 1960-ih do 1990-ih godina, a ima ne samo povijesnu nego i umjetničku vrijednost. U ožujku 2017. godine u Odesi (Ukrajina) otkriven je izgubljeni dio fotoarhive Leonida Burlake. Stoga je prva faza istraživanja bila posvećena analiziranju povijesti otkrivanja arhivske građe, njezinom stanju i sadržaju te sistematizaciji fotografija koje je sačinjavaju. U drugoj fazi istraživanja analiziran je drugi dio arhive koji nije bio izgubljen, nego ga je sačuvao sam Leonid Burlaka, a koji je ukupno sadržavao više od 300 filmova. U procesu istraživanja arhive otvorila su se brojna nova pitanja. Kako će izgledati daljnje postojanje i očuvanje arhive? Kakvo bi moglo biti iskustvo prezentacije arhive, njezine uključenosti u umjetničke prakse i utjecaja na kolektivnu percepciju u postsovjetskom razdoblju? U ovom trenutku arhiva čini temelj interdisciplinarnog projekta *Fragile Memory* [Krhko sjećanje]. Stoga se članak dotiče nekoliko tema: povijesti arhiva, pitanja u vezi njegova istraživanja, kao i iskustva njegove popularizacije koja se u proteklih pet godina odvijala u sklopu projekta *Fragile Memory*.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

ukrajinska fotografija, ukrajinska kultura, privatna arhiva, sjećanje, sovjetsko razdoblje, popularizacija arhivskog materijala

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ABSTRACT

The archive of famous Soviet Ukrainian cinematographer Leonid Burlaka is an example of photography illustrating various spheres of life in Ukraine from the 1960s to the 1990s and has not only historical but also artistic value. In March 2017, the missing part of Leonid Burlaka's photo archive was discovered in Odessa (Ukraine). Accordingly, the first phase of research was devoted to the analysis of the history of archive discovery, its condition, contents, and the systematization of photographs constituting the archive. In the second stage of the research, another part of the archive was analyzed, which was not lost but preserved by Leonid Burlaka himself and totaled over 300 films. In the process of exploring, the archive raised numerous new issues. How will the further life and preservation of the archive look? What might be the experience of presentation of the archive, its involvement in artistic practices and its influence on collective perception in the post-Soviet period? Currently, the archive forms the basis of the interdisciplinary project *Fragile Memory*. Therefore, the article touches on several issues: the history of the archive, questions regarding its research, as well as the experience of its popularization, which has been conducted during the past five years within the framework of the *Fragile Memory* project.

KEYWORDS

Ukrainian photography, Ukrainian culture, private archive, memory, Soviet period, popularization of archival materials

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In his essay “In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, Or, the End of the Social” Jean Baudrillard asserts that “withdrawing into the private could well be a direct defiance of the political, a form of actively resisting political manipulation”.¹ The private photographic archives of famous Ukrainian artists of the Soviet period, especially those whose activities were closely connected with the official line of art, are particularly interesting in this regard.² Generally, only the official line was covered by the study, while the private photo and video materials were found to be under-explored.

The figure of Leonid Burlaka and the significance of his work in cinema is incredibly important to Ukrainian culture. Despite the fact that his cinematic activity is well-known and studied by Ukrainian cinema historians, several years ago, the personality of this artist caught the researchers’ attention again. The discovery of a missing part from his photographic archives and the unification of this material with the already existing artist’s personal archive defined the direction for new research. Leonid Burlaka’s activities coincided with the challenging historical period known as the era of stagnation.³ This was a particularly difficult time for Ukraine because it marked a new wave of repression against the Ukrainian creative intelligentsia.⁴ The activity of any cinematographer was entirely subordinate to the structures that closely monitored and controlled their creativity. And indeed, the cinematographic work of Leonid Burlaka may seem to exist in a conjunctural order. However, it is worth remembering that even in conditions of complete control, filmmakers have found ways to realize their own ideas.

In Leonid Burlaka’s case, sometimes there were audaciously shot scenes — expressive close-ups, images of nudity atypical of the Soviet cinema, and long shots made in a way that contradicts the Soviet aesthetic of the film. Not all of these artistic techniques were often used, but such cases have occurred and have always been threatened by censors to be excluded from the film. In her study, Zoya Alferova, says that, in the era of stagnation, there was not only a forced unification of different cinematographers on film projects that had what is referred to as a “manufacturing purpose”, but also cutting too bold visual ideas out of the films.⁵ It was during the stagnation of Soviet society that the continuing humiliation of a person by the authorities became the reason for the marginalization of the concept of the so-called ordinary Soviet person.

In these circumstances, the artist had two ways. The first one assumed a full retreat to the field of unofficial art — the Soviet underground, dissidence, while the second one assumed the deepening of a private sphere hidden from prying eyes. It is no coincidence that Baudrillard talks about active resistance. In the context of the opposition between the private and the official in the Soviet period, it is obvious that photography, which focuses on private life in conditions of resistance to the official, is able to demonstrate more important aspects of the life of a society.

The case of Leonid Burlaka is a unique example of a visual document created for private use in a private space as a memory. But at the same time, the abundance of intimate and family scenes and artistic experiments demonstrates how daring and uncompromising the artist felt in the realm of his private world. This is a sort of counter-archive, which was an opposition to the official view of photography and the representation of life. The private, deeply personal and sentimental enter into a dispute with the official, and this aspect is the key to the study of the artist’s personality.

Leonid Burlaka was among the most prominent Soviet filmmakers. His main film work, *The meeting place cannot be changed*, was shot at the Odessa Film Studio in 1979 and truly became a cult classic of the Soviet period, as it involved famous iconic actors, for instance, Vladimir Vysotsky. In addition to *The meeting place cannot be changed*, Leonid Burlaka implemented numerous projects as a cinematographer and director. All his life, he worked at the Odessa Film Studio. Therefore, a particular interest in Leonid Burlaka’s case study points to the fact that we are dealing with not only a private amateur archive but with the archive of a professional artist.

However, the archive, or rather its part, which became the subject of my research, was lost and, for many years, unreachable. The films were found in the garage of Leonid Burlaka’s country house. When the archive was discovered in the spring of 2017, it was suggested that they were deliberately hidden. History knows many cases when photo archives were found accidentally, and, at first glance, there was nothing unusual, but the grandson of Leonid Burlaka, who found these films, was puzzled by the fact that this part of the archive was separated from the main archive and hidden. The films were in a very poor condition, and the method of preservation was not the one Burlaka usually used. Some of the films were damaged, most likely due to poor storage conditions, while others torn apart and only partially preserved. Such deformation can result from exposure to low temperatures or humidity, or the films have been intentionally damaged.

The process of digitizing and examining the films was supposed to confirm the assumption that the films were hidden intentionally. But the theory that the films were hidden because of some intimate photographs and images of some people has not been confirmed.

The digitized material proved to be really unique. Its creation date is 1964, and its location is Moscow. There are 21 films that can be divided into five series: documentation of the shooting process, the shot of a student work by Leonid Burlaka called *Life of the Cranes*, the documentation of the daily students’ life at the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography⁶ (also abbreviated as VGIK), positive films from the filming of the movie *The Newlyweds* and a historical football match which took place in Moscow in 1964. Furthermore, the work with some of the films was

¹ Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, Or, the End of the Social*, 39.

² The official line of art was strictly regulated by the government in the USSR. The creative unions founded by the authorities (USSR Union of Cinematographers, USSR Union of Writers, etc.) were the primary instrument to control the creative community. The official line of art was subordinated to the principles of “socialist realism”.

³ The concept of the Era of Stagnation or Brezhnevian Stagnation usually refers to the period of the political crisis of the last decades of the existence of the USSR during the reign of Leonid Brezhnev from 1964 to 1982.

⁴ For more about the Ukrainian dissident movement during the period of stagnation, the history of repression and struggle, cf. Verba, Yasen, *The human rights movement in Ukraine: documents of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, 1976–1980*; Сінченко, *Дисиденти. Антологія текстів*.

⁵ Алфьорова, “Кіно сімдесятих років в історико-політичному контексті”, 274.

⁶ All-Union State Institute of Cinematography — the main film school of the Soviet Union based in Moscow, founded in 1919 as the first State film school.

especially difficult. The emulsion was exfoliating directly in hands, and the images on those films were almost completely destroyed. However, it was decided to digitize them as well.

To begin with, it is worth focusing on some of the archive's series, inasmuch as this material is the only preserved example of Leonid Burlaka's private photography from the 1960s. *The Life of the Cranes* (Fig. 1,2) was a student film by Leonid Burlaka. It is immediately noticeable that the structure of each frame is typical of the visual language of the cinematography school of the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography. In the 1960s, the traditions of Photographic Constructivism of Alexander Rodchenko were still strong: expressive foreshortening, close-ups, showing the dynamics through the lines. Moreover, the Soviet student movie was intended to express the subject of social responsibility; this is a movie about the work of a crane operator. In the process of investigating the films, it became apparent that not all of these images were made by Leonid Burlaka. The alleged author of the photographs is Vadim Avloshenko, a cinematographer and Leonid's classmate. We must not forget that, at the art universities of the Soviet Union, students were brutally controlled by university leadership and were required to report on their creative endeavors. But in this case, backstage filming was not included in official reports and was not a training task. These images were taken for a private archive, only for memory. It is important that, despite the fact that this material is private, it shows the student's professionalism and an effort to create a pure aesthetic frame.



Sl. / Fig. 1 Sa snimanja filma *Život dizalica* / Behind the scenes of *Life of Cranes*, 1964. Arhiva Leonid Burlaka / Leonid Burlaka Archive.

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The next set of films is even more interesting in the realm of the preservation of memory. This complex of photography requires a more comprehensive investigation. It is primarily a history of relationships and communications (photographs of the artist's inner circle), a history of everydayness (daily, sometimes occasional documentation of life), a fragment of a certain period of time, a private history that helps understand a much broader historical context. This is a typical example of private photography, and the main purpose of creating these images is to save them for memory or for the future. At that time, of course, such images were relevant only for a limited group of people. But today, we can use them for research and supplement the history or biographies of individual persons. For instance, Daniel Bargelovsky and Vadim Avloshenko, friends and classmates of Leonid Burlaka were identified in the photographs. Daniel Bargelowski was a famous Polish director,⁷ screenwriter, actor and writer, and in 1964, he was a student at the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography. The story of Daniel Bargelovsky, in this case, is a separate part of the research, which can complete the missing information on his life in Moscow. But the special significance of these photos lies in the fact that a private photo made for the purpose of archiving a memory of the student times, depicting everything (walks, living conditions, the process of making films, feasting, and talking to girls), was not shot in an amateur manner.

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"Witold Sadowy Daniel Bargielowski. Pożegnanie (November 18, 1932–July 23, 2016)", *Encyklopedia Teatru*. Cf: <https://encyklopediateatru.pl/artykuly/226379/daniel-bargielowski-pozegnanie-18111932-23072016> (date of access June 27, 2022)

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Schröter, "Archive—Post/photographic".

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"Fragile Memory. Leonid Burlaka. Forgotten Archive of Cinematographer".

Here we can see the creative vision and the methods of the cinematography school of the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography in creating the frame.

Moreover, there is another series that needs to be discussed in more detail. What is at issue here is not the archive itself but its future. Among the films, there are those where the image is completely or partially destroyed. In some images, it is possible to see fragments of reality: such as young men, rural houses, a river, a Soviet car, etc. There are photos where the image is totally destroyed as a consequence of the corrosion of the emulsion. After the digitization of the films, it became obvious that these abstract forms look really magnificent and seem to be independent works of art. Since then, the question has been: what should be done with this archive, how should its subsequent life look? As a result of research and thorough work on the archive, it was decided to present the archive as an art project in one of the galleries of contemporary art in Kyiv. After the discovery of the archives, we faced the task not only of preserving it but also of presenting, popularizing it and providing access to everyone who was interested. And the first attempt to exhibit the archive was the first step towards that goal.

It is evident that the tendency to use the theme of archives in contemporary art is widespread in curatorial practice. Researchers believe that the main trends in interacting with and rethinking archives are the search for a hidden sequence and logic in the coexistence of various materials or the invention of a new logic that makes it possible to restructure the material in different ways.⁸ As a result, during the formation of the exhibition, the purpose was not only to show the previously lost archive of the famous Ukrainian filmmaker but to comprehend it in the context of various meanings.

During the creation of the first exhibition at the Art 14 Gallery in Kyiv in February 2018, curator and artist Glib Vyshelevsky offered a simple but very powerful decision. The exposition was constructed in a way that the first photograph of the visual series was the clearest one. This image was clear and easily decoded, while the last photo of the series was a completely destroyed image. Here it was possible to draw an analogy with human memory, which selectively preserves memories over the years, while some memories disappear completely. Destruction is a peculiar feature of memory. This is the essence of a human memory drama that cannot be reproduced, but there is the value of photography, which is capable of preserving it. The destruction of the emulsion in certain photos is partial and, in other cases, completely destroys the images, which is a direct metaphor of human memory. Memory destroys the unnecessary or the painful, leaving only fragments, which can sometimes be read in images that have almost disappeared.

The next exhibition was the opening event of the Krakow International Film Festival in 2019.⁹ The exposition was



Sl. / Fig. 2 Sa snimanja filma *Život dizalica* / Behind the scenes of *Life of Cranes*, 1964.
Arhiva Leonid Burlaka / Leonid Burlaka Archive. ↑

created by the gallery director, Margarita Vladimirova (Fig. 3). She refused to accept the concept of the destruction of human memory and offered something like an immersion in photography: all the images were located throughout the gallery space, even under the ceiling. Small magic lanterns with positive films were also used to expand the visual language of the exhibition. It allowed scrolling through a positive film and changing the images, watching them and feeling their materiality. Subsequently, in 2019, the project was presented at the Odessa International Film Festival. Various approaches to building an exhibition in gallery space have demonstrated how plastic the pictorial language of a photo archive can be and how, in fact, the same material can speak completely differently about an individual, personal and historical memory, as well as the value of these archives.

After all these exhibitions, it was necessary to conduct research on the part of the private archive kept by Leonid Burlaka at home. This part of the archive has been systematized and dated by the artist himself. The archive consists of more than 300 films shot in the period from 1970 to 1980. It should be said that, after graduating from the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography, Leonid Burlaka was offered to stay in Moscow, but he refused and returned to Odessa, Ukraine, and spent all his life working only at the Odesa Film Studio¹⁰—one of the largest Soviet film studios, where he shot a number of significant films.

Throughout his life, working at the studio as a director of photography, Leonid Burlaka constantly took photographs for his personal archive. What is this part of the archive? First, it is important to understand that Leonid Burlaka was not engaged by the authorities to participate in the propaganda program, and he did not provide services for the Communist Party's propagandistic needs. Therefore, his entire archive is an observation of the world around him, the photographs that he took for himself. It may seem that we are dealing with ordinary everyday photography, but at the same time, we must remember that it is made by an artist with an art education, a professional. When analyzing all the material, it is notable that, in addition to daily photographs, such as a daughter's birthday or a family vacation, powerful works of art can be suddenly found (Fig. 4).

The entire archive can be divided into several recurring themes, always related to the daily rituals or typical of Soviet life and the Soviet people: life of the USSR, images of the family, wife and two daughters, vacations, celebratory feasts (a ritual often found in Soviet cinema, but also an integral part of any private archive in the USSR), landscapes and traveling abroad.¹¹ The fact is that in the 1980s in the Soviet Union, creative elites (writers, artists, filmmakers) were allowed to travel to Western Europe. These trips were carried out in groups only and were accompanied by KGB officers to monitor and prevent the escape of Soviet citizens abroad. Leonid Burlaka's archives contain films shot in Paris, Madrid and other European cities (Fig. 5). They are interesting insofar as some of the photographs were taken covertly,



Sl. / Fig. 3 Izložba *Krhko pamćenje / Fragile Memory* exhibition, Galerija ASP, Krakow, 2019. FOTO / PHOTO: Ihor Ivanko

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¹⁰ Odesa Film Studio was founded in 1907 as a private film factory. After that, it was nationalized by the Soviet authorities in 1922.

¹¹ Frequently, in contemporary cultural studies, the term "vernacular" is used to define this type of photography. In this research, I would like to avoid using this term because different theorists give different meanings to it and as a rule, it refers to the photography belonging to amateurs. Maria-Alina Asavei particularizes the complexity and ambiguity of this term. Cf. Asavei, "Indexical Realism during Socialism: Documenting and Remembering the 'Everyday Realities' of Late Socialist Romania through Photographs", 8.



Sl. / Fig. 4 Iz privatnog arhiva Leonida Burlake / From the private archive of Leonid Burlaka, 1970-e / 1970s.

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BRINGING DOWN THE "ARCHIVE FEVER"



Sl. / Fig. 5 Iz privatnog arhiva Leonida Burlake / From the private archive of Leonid Burlaka, 1980-e / 1980s.

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without looking through the viewfinder. However, most of these images show the architectural monuments and streets of the city. There is a strong impression that these photos were taken with the thought that such an opportunity would never happen again, so the photographer paid great attention to details. Moreover, the archive contains films that show the backstage of various movies,¹² which have great historical significance and value for the history of Ukrainian cinema during the Soviet period. This part of the archive still requires further study of its iconography and its artistic characteristics, but some conclusions can already be drawn.

This part of the archive has not been exhibited anywhere, but these more than 300 films have finally become the basis of an interdisciplinary project called *Fragile Memory*. If the popularization of photography dating from the 1960s occurred through exhibitions, then the main part of the archive became the material for a documentary film about Leonid Burlaka. The *Fragile Memory* project could not confine itself to research and exhibitions in the framework of international film festivals; it also includes a documentary film, the creation of which has been supported by both Ukrainian and European institutions. The documentary, directed by the grandson of Leonid Burlaka, Ihor Ivanko, premiered at the Krakow Film Festival on May 30, 2022.¹³ It has become one of the main stages in the popularization of the creativity of Leonid Burlaka, since it was aimed at the most comprehensive representation of the cinematographer's personality in a particular historical period through the analysis of his personal photo archive.

Today, most researchers of the history and history of culture talk about the importance of private archives as a separate phenomenon of memory. The case of Leonid Burlaka is significant for several reasons. As mentioned above, in the era of stagnation, the personal archive of any artist was a kind of a counter-archive in relation to the official line of art because only in the private sphere (as the most important or popular use of the medium as well)¹⁴ could they feel absolutely free. Moreover, such an archive is the preservation of memory, not only individual but collective as well, because the photographs present social rituals, historical situations, people and their actions. Such archives are still privacy-oriented but are able to reproduce public discourse. It is the microhistory of an individual person that is based on supposedly irrelevant, purely human moments. And despite the fact that such archives are not purely artistic, they show an entire era. Preservation of private memory in the Soviet Union has always been a multifaceted issue. The importance of preserving and popularizing the archives of famous persons of Ukrainian art is evident today because the connection between private memory and collective history is undeniable. And even though the reconstruction of events is complicated, the research process continues, and the photograph itself gradually answers a number of questions.

¹² For example, there is a visual documentation of the backstage from the filming of Andrei Tarkovsky and other famous directors.

¹³ The film received a Special Mention at the Krakow International Film Festival.

¹⁴ Ferenc, *Fotografia. Dyletanci, amatorzy i artyści*, 116.

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