

**Cinema from History to Heritage: Steps towards
Safeguarding the Cinematic Heritage**

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Abstract

The seventh art is the most popular form of media that helped shaping the world's consciousness during the Twentieth Century. At the same time, cinema is of great significance as it can safeguard the intangible and tangible heritage of different societies, in addition to their history, values, and philosophy. Since the art of cinema has been conceived as a national and global heritage, different countries have begun to identify films as records of their past, which help to build their future. This paper argues that cinema has passed through many phases, from being merely a commercial commodity to being considered a creative art. In addition, the research highlight on how cinema has been transformed as recorded history to be a heritage that must be safeguarded, by cultural entities as the UNESCO, and film specialists' individuals as well.

Finally, the paper focus on Egypt's efforts to safeguard the Egyptian cinema heritage, and how it was among the first countries to care about its cinematic heritage very early in the Thirties s by 'Talaat Pacha Harb', the founder of Studio Masr.

Introduction

The seven arts are the most popular media that helped to shape the world's consciousness during the Twenty Century. Besides, it is a valuable source of entertainment and also education. A large audience from all levels can also grasp it¹. One of the main significances of the cinema too that it can safeguard the intangible and tangible heritage of different societies, in addition to their history, values, and philosophy².

Since the art of cinema has been seen as a national and global heritage, societies realized that they should preserve it. Different countries have begun to identify films as records of their past, which help to build their future. Moreover, some cultural sociology researchers have considered cinema art as one of the factors which help to create the collective identity of the nations. This research is divided into four parts. The first part argues that cinema has passed through many phases, from being only a commercial commodity to being considered a creative art. At last, it has been recognized by the states as a cultural construct that significantly influences people's emotions and minds.

¹ Shafik. Viola. *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*. Cairo, 2007.p. 22-25

² Mayor, Federico. "Appeal by the Director-General of UNESCO: Saving the Cinematic Heritage. *The UNESCO Courier*" August 1995, p. 84.

Nevertheless, that was not enough; after the great success of cinema worldwide and the enormous numbers of films produced, it was needed to look at this art differently.

In the second part, this concern has been discussed on how cinema has been transformed as recorded history to be a heritage that must be safeguarded. This part presents a short timeline of UNSECO work toward this concern. Motion pictures, as a whole, have been seen by UNESCO as the treasure sources of history, Culture, and tangible and intangible heritage of the nations.

However, before the UNESCO concern, individual efforts were to save this heritage worldwide. The third part discusses examples of these initiatives since the 30s of the twentieth century. Private and public sectors found them; film archives, organizations, and institutions have been established worldwide to safeguard the global cinema heritage until the present.

Finally, the fourth part is dedicated to the efforts done to safeguard the Egyptian cinema heritage. Although Egypt is a developing country, it was among the first countries to care about its cinematic heritage very early in the 30s by Talaat Pacha Harb, the founder of Studio Masr. The research ends with a conclusion that discusses what is missing to safeguard and preserve this important heritage and why it is crucial to safeguard the Egyptian cinematic heritage in particular.

1. Cinema as a cultural construct

The world only recognized cinema's cultural significance during the second half of the twentieth century. Since the appearance of the first Short Film by Lumière Brothers in Paris in 1895³ and for many decades, the cultural value of cinema has not been considered and even denied for a long time. During this time, the Film was considered a commercial product exclusively and, in many countries, large quantities of films were thrown or burnt. The argument for that destruction was the change of tastes and cinema modes. Moreover, the appearance of new technical developments, which required getting rid of the old films, was one of the reasons too⁴.

After successful films worldwide, the cinema began to draw attention to its influential importance to the audience. Unlike the other branches of arts, such as literature, painting, and theatres, the Film has the power to reach a vast typical audience. The immediate success of Film has been thanks to the new dialogue with the public. Every spectator falls under the illusion that he is at the heart of the action inside the Film. Cinema has also succeeded in eliminating time and spatial distance⁵. It helped to bring people together and to learn about different cultures before the revolution of communication. This latter has been booming since the beginning of the 21st century.

³ <https://www.britannica.com/art/history-of-the-motion-picture> (accessed August 2022).

⁴ Glissant, E. "Eternal cinema" in *The UNESCO Courier*". August 1984. p. 3.

⁵ Glissant, E. p. 85.

In addition, cinemas are the most common features we can find in most cities worldwide, and watching a film is affordable for most social classes. Alongside the entertainment message of films, they offer historical, social, and cultural doses for the audience, as John O'Donoghue, the Irish Minister for Arts, Sport, and Tourism, announced in 2005 during the launching of the composition of the Irish Film Board.⁶

To conclude, Melina Mercouri, the Greek Minister of Culture during the 90s and the actress as well, has successfully resumed the cinema as an essential cultural construct for societies:

*The twentieth century will go down in history as the century that added new art to the history of civilization: the seventh art (.....). It preserves philosophy, history, daily life, and the problems, emotions, and attitudes of an entire age.*⁷

2. The cinema, from history to heritage

Many specialized voices in humanities said that the art of cinema had kept the values and the memory of the twentieth century, and it is one of the primary forms of expression in a changing world⁸. Therefore, the cinema has become seen as a human heritage, not only a part of the history of human creative art.

⁶ O'Connell. "Moving History: Why We Must Protect Our Film Heritage, in *History Ireland*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Mar. - Apr., 2005), p. 05.

⁷ Mayor, F. p. 84.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 84.

However, it is ironic that cinema, the most famous art of the twentieth century, is the most in danger. No form of art was threatened and destructed, intentionally or not, as cinema resulted in heavy losses. The disastrous consequences of these losses of the memory of humanity have become fully appreciated⁹.

Thus, there was an urgent need to preserve this heritage for future generations. The expressions of “Film Heritage”, “Cinematic Heritage” and then “Safeguarding the Film heritage” have emerged in the world of heritage institutions and experts.

In 1980, it was the institutionalized start when UNESCO endorsed a recommendation for the Safeguarding and Preservation of Moving Images, considering them the manifestations of three elements; expression of the contemporary Culture, a mobile heritage that can quickly move around the world, and finally the reflection of the cultural identity of the nations.¹⁰.

In 1992, UNESCO created “The Memory of the World” Program to deal with the enormous losses in the world's documentary heritage by preserving endangered collections and assets. This project includes many resources, among them audio recordings and moving images.¹¹.

⁹ <https://en.unesco.org/courier/eternal-cinema?language=fr> (accessed June 2022)

¹⁰ Matthew S. “Film Heritage and The Cinematic Common”, *Angelaki*, Vol. 18, N: 4, 2013. p.180.

¹¹ Springer. J. *Memory of The World: National Cinematic Heritage*. UNESCO. Paris. 1995. Preamble.

In 1995, Frederico Mayor, the Director General of UNESCO, made an impressive appeal to the state's members and all the cinema community, published in "The UNESCO Courier" in the issue of July-August 1995, to establish a fund for Safeguarding of Film Heritage. Many people concerned with the cinema heritage answered his appeal, and "the Fund" was established.¹²

In October 2003, UNESCO launched its convention for "Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage," in which the "Performing Arts" has been listed.¹³ It was discovered the intangible heritage (ICH) had become highly threatened due to many factors such as globalization, wars, and social change. This convention and that of "Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage" held in 1972, plus the UNESCO program called "Memory of the World" established in 1992, shape a triangle to safeguard the ICH¹⁴. Cinema plays a vital role in this regard since it is one of the best art that has saved the ICH. Consequently, safeguarding the film heritage is fundamental of saving the ICH of different societies.

Last but not least, in 2005, the UNESCO Convention, which had the title of "Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions," also emphasized film productions as one of the prominent expressions of global cultural diversity.

¹² Mayor, F. p. 84.

¹³ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/santiago/culture/intangible-heritage/convention-intangible-cultural-heritage/> (accessed May 2022)

¹⁴ Furlan, N.V. "Intangible Cultural Heritage and film". *Documenting and Preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage on Film*. Ljubljana. 2015. p. 12.

Since 2007, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) has used its biennial survey of feature films to evaluate the cultural diversity in cinema, according to data obtained from 52 countries. Three indicators measured the diversity: the diversity of languages in the domestic Film, the country of origin of the Top 10 Films watched worldwide, and the consumption of these films in different regions. The result showed the popularity of films of USA. However, this study also proves the audience's dynamism; they still prefer to watch films that express their Culture and heritage and are spoken in their language¹⁵.

3. Sporadic initiatives examples for safeguarding the cinematic heritage outside of UNESCO

Before the UNSECO conventions and its various programs concerning the preservation of the cinema heritage, Film archives and libraries had existed in many countries for many years with different purposes.¹⁶

Film care started during the first years of the twentieth century (1825-1920) by the film manufacturers and distributors to manage their industry and increase their production investments. Their tools were periodicals, handbooks, festivals, and conferences. However, their “industrial” efforts were the first indicators later to the cultural institutions on how to preserve this cinematic heritage, but this time to raise cultural awareness and preserve this massive heritage for future generations.¹⁷

¹⁵ UIS. *Film Features Diversity*. N. 24. May 2013. p. 2-6.

¹⁶ UNESCO. *Memory of The World: National Cinematic Heritage*. Paris. 1995. Preamble.

¹⁷ Gracy, K. F. "The Evolution and Integration of Moving Image Preservation Work into Cultural Heritage Institutions." *Information & Culture*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2013, p. 370

In 1927, the first cinémathèques and film libraries were founded in France. It was a new idea to set up a museum to cinema history. There were other trials before to collect the film material that could help document other subjects' evolution. Many organizations also specialized in other domains such as agriculture and education that played an active role and sometimes opposed the maintenance and promotion of films screening according to their interests.¹⁸

In the 1930s, the first film archive was created as a private project in the UK, but with the creation of the International Film Archive (FIAF) in 1938, the task of preserving the historical record has become more professional.¹⁹

FIAF was founded in Paris with the agreement of four partners: the *Cinémathèque Française*, Germany's *Reichsfilmarchiv*, the British Film Institute, and the Museum of Modern Art Film Library in New York. Fearing of losing films during wars, the FIAF's mission was to preserve and archive the films produced in the four founders' countries²⁰. Nowadays, the FIAF includes more than 166 organizations in 75 countries with eight goals as a mission²¹. The numbers of partners show how the film heritage has become a global concern.

¹⁸ Gauthier Ch. & Brost. L. "1927, Year One of the French Film Heritage?" in *Film History*, Vol. 17, No. 2/3, 2005.p. 290-300.

¹⁹ Springer. J. preamble.

²⁰ <https://www.fiafnet.org/pages/History/Origins-of-FIAF.html> (accessed Sept. 2020)

²¹ See the eight goals of their mission in <https://www.fiafnet.org/pages/Community/Mission-FIAF.html> ((accessed July 2022))

Many years later, in 1990, the famous director Martin Scorsese founded “The Film Foundation” as a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting and preserving motion picture history. The foundation succeeded in restoring more than 800 films in partnership with different studios and archives around the world²². For example, the Film Foundation signed in 2017 a long-term project with “the Pan African Federation of Filmmakers (FEPACI)” -founded in 1969- to restore and preserve more than 50 significant films made in the African continent²³.

4. Safeguarding the Egyptian cinematic heritage

Locally, Egypt is considered one of the world's first countries to recognize cinema art. Brother Lumière displayed a short film in cafes in Alexandria and Cairo in 1896, one year after their first display in Paris. That event was followed by the film industry starting in Egypt, by foreigners who lived in Egypt during this time. In 1927, Egyptians began to make their films, and the first full-length feature, "Laila" was produced. Thus, it is easily said that Egypt has a vast cinematic heritage made over more than 100 years.²⁴.

²² <http://www.film-foundation.org/mission-statement> (accessed July 2022)

²³ http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/partnership_with_the_film_foundations_world_cinema_projec/ (accessed June 2022)

²⁴ Shafik. V. p.56-60.

The First who had the vision to preserve this heritage was the great Egyptian economist Taalat Harb Pacha in 1935, after the foundation of Studios Misr. He established storage facilities to preserve the films produced in the studios. Unfortunately, in 1950, these premises were lost due to a fire burst at the studios. Because of this incident, The Egyptian Film Archive was established by the "Office of Arts." Also, in the same year, Egypt participated with the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) as an observer.

Once more, destiny was not on our cinema heritage side; another fire destroyed this archive in 1958. In 1968, the state was convinced to establish mandatory deposit obligations. Finally, legislation was carried out in 1975 under the Law no. 35, which obliged producers and distributors to deposit a copy of 35 mm of each Film, produced and displayed in Egypt or abroad, in the Film Archive called later "The National Archives"²⁵.

Internationally, Egypt was among more than 50 countries chosen by the UNESCO program "Memory of the World" to restore a part of its cinematic heritage. This project was carried out through "The Cultural Development Fund (C.D.F.)" located in the Opera House area at El Gezira. Fifteen Egyptian films were chosen and considered landmarks in the history of Egyptian cinema and the world's cinematic heritage. Among these films are *Lashin* (1939), *El Souk El Soda* (1946), *El Fetewa* (1957), *El Zowga 13* (1962), and *El Momia* (1975).

²⁵ Osman. Khaled. Egyptian National Film Archive, in *The UNESCO Courier*. August 1984. p. 9.

Conclusion:

Despite establishing the first films' archives during the 30s of the twentieth century and until the present, films are still threatened by loss or burst.

When UNESCO became more institutionalized in the 80s²⁶ Many advanced methods were invented to preserve all forms of motion picture heritage, including cinema. For example, "A Register Program" has been established to list and register influential films as the World Heritage Sites list (WHS) concept. For example, nine silent films made by the British director Hitchcock have been listed by the UNESCO UK Register. This latter established a "Fund" formed of more than ten organizations and individuals concerned with cinema to restore these nine films²⁷.

In the researcher's opinion, all these efforts are essential but not quietly enough. We can benefit from the revolution of communications of the twenty-first century and the fast evolution of technology to safeguard our cinema heritage. We have a good example; lately, in 2016, Lombardo *et al.* presented in their article published in "Journal on Computing and Cultural Heritage" a new method to preserve films in a digital version under the name of "a formal encoding through a computational ontology."²⁸ We hope that cinematic heritage will be safeguarded in those methods and other advanced ones for a very long time.

²⁶ Matthew, S. p.188.

²⁷ <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/announcements/hitchcock-films-awarded-unesco-status> (accessed August 2022)

²⁸ Lombardo. V. *et al.* "Safeguarding and Accessing Drama as Intangible Cultural Heritage". *Journal on Computing and Cultural Heritage (JOCCH)*, 02/2016, Volume 9, Issue. p. 1.

As for Egypt, cinema is not only a heritage, but also it is one of the most influential of the -so-called- “Soft Powers of Egypt”. It has played a fundamental role in shaping the collective identity of the Arab world, especially during the post-colonial time after the War II²⁹. Moreover, thanks to cinema, the Egyptian dialect has been, for a very long time, the most understood and favorite for many Arab people. So, safeguarding this heritage, including films, equipment, and stories behind screens and studios, should also be considered a national concern.

Finally, our Egyptian international director Youssef Chahine (1926-2008) had his point of view on the Safeguarding of the cinematic heritage by saying.

"I am not convinced that it is necessary to appeal to intellectual snobbery, charity, or clairvoyance to make people aware of the catastrophe that is threatening the cinema, I should prefer to think that it is through humanity, intelligence, and above all, through love for future generations that we will save the cinema".³⁰

²⁹ Shafik, V. p. 80.

³⁰ Mayor, F. p. 84.

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