

ARAB FILM HERITAGE ARCHIVE

Project Summary and Proposal

Introduction

The visual history of the Middle East and North Africa region is being slowly erased. There is currently no film archive that can adequately preserve the rich cultural history of Arab Cinema in the Middle East. And, with an rapidly growing body of film/video works being produced, the creation of an archive is more urgent than ever. The Arab Film Heritage Archive will not only stem the tide of destruction and isolation of these important visual documents, but set a precedent for the future of proactive preservation of the visual legacy in Jordan and the larger Middle East.

This proposal seeks for the establishment of a state-of-the art film archive, located in Jordan, that will fuse cutting-edge preservation techniques with a dynamic interactive database that harnesses the power of online communities. The archive will be a tool in the hands of the public, filmmakers, and scholars to collaborate in the writing of history and the creation of cultural heritage. Far from charity, the Heritage Archive is an active community.

At the heart of the project is a belief that cultural history belongs to those who lived it. We also believe that the archive must be located in the region and that its staff and principal supporters should be from the region. It is also important that the archive not be an island unto itself, and instead act as a platform for fostering new works and encourage the exchange of information and resources to do so.

What's happening Now

In 2009, over 850 canisters of film were discovered in Amman, Jordan. A grant from HM King Abdullah II of Jordan led to the digitization of just 10 of these reels. In this small sample, significant discoveries were made, including:

- A documentary confirmed to be part of the PLO Film Archive, lost since 1985.
- Rare footage of HM King Hussein in 1968 addressing the United Nations in the aftermath of the Six Day War.
- Documentary footage of Jerusalem in 1968 and its aftermath.
- Unidentified propaganda films from Vietnam made to highlight relations between Vietnam, Russia, and political struggles in the Middle East in the 1960's and 70's.
- Russian feature films sent as part of a cultural exchange between Russian and Arab partners, ranging from the 1920's to the 1980's.

This represents a tiny fraction of the collection, and an even tinier fraction of what exists throughout the region. Countless undiscovered treasures are being housed in temporary locations, in danger of being lost if not given a proper home. There is currently no archive in the region that preserves these films.

The cultural impact and urgency of the project has already motivated scholars, filmmakers, and artists to volunteer their time and expertise to create a complete inventory of the collection. Using online communities and DIY skills, the team is currently translating over 850 cans labeled in Arabic and Russian.

Once this information is complete, institutions and individuals with knowledge of these films and their history will be invited to identify the origin and provenance of the films. To date, our supporters include the Red Sea Institute of Cinematic Arts, the Royal Film Commission of Jordan, filmmakers Anne Marie Jacir and Mai Masri, The University of London, the University of Southern California, and the University of New York. All of our supporters have joined because of a personal relationship to the collection. By reaching out directly to our friends and colleagues in the region and within our own networks, we have developed a passionate and committed collective more powerful than any single institution.

By relying on crowd-sourcing techniques, this project takes advantage of the knowledge and experience of thousands instead of relying on a small handful of experts. We believe this will make a more valuable resource for those who use it. When launched, the general public can add their own experience to the database. The impact and reach of the project is virtually unlimited.

Short Term Goals

Translation: The immediate priority is the translation of the canister labels. Currently, this is being done by just a few volunteers. A minimal budget could help pay for a dedicated team of translators who could complete this process in a matter of weeks.

Identification: From the list of translated titles, a collaborative team of film experts across the world will be invited to help identify which films are of note, and in need of preservation. Best practices in intellectual property assessment will be followed.

Preservation: Once we know how many important films are in the collection, an accurate budget can be drafted that will outline the cost of basic preservation. Immediate action must be taken to ensure that the films do not succumb to weather conditions, decay already in progress, or other damage. To address this, an archivist will make a special visit to the collection for a full assessment in the summer of 2012. The films are currently stored in a temperature-controlled, secure facility.

Mid Term Goals

Support: Many filmmakers, scholars, historians, and community leaders have expressed interest in actively supporting the project. An advisory board will be assembled to oversee the process of preserving the film currently in our possession as well as the establishment of the permanent archive. The board and its supporters will also be charged with finding stakeholders who can actively help us achieve our goals through their knowledge, resources, and/or financial support.

Digitization: Films will be transferred to preservation-quality digital copies. Ideally, the archive will purchase its own transfer equipment so that the films will not have to be transported. Digital copies will be kept and updated at regular intervals for safe keeping. The original films will also be kept and maintained in the vault. Finally, web-encoded copies will be made for viewing online.

Creation of Interactive Database: Using open-source software resources, the films will be available for viewing online. Unlike most online archives, however, the Arab Heritage Film Archive will provide massive opportunities for input from its users, much like a Wikipedia page, but far more dynamic:

- Historical information can be added by experts, giving context to each piece.
- Writers and bloggers can link their work to a film.
- Teachers can use the films to build curriculum and share it with other teachers. Students can post their work as well.
- The database will gather information from outside sources as it becomes available on the web - articles, books, biographical data, art works, etc.
- Users can add comments to a film, upload their media such as family photos or letters that come from a time or scene depicted in a film.

The collection will be much more than just old films. It is also a collection of perspectives. It can also be a recording of unheard, unseen personal history that comes from the people who know the real stories behind the films.

Every time a user visits the database, it will have grown. The experience, therefore, is never the same twice.

Long Term Goals

Construction of Permanent Archive: A fully equipped structure to house the films and films submitted from the region. Full HD transfer equipment for in-house digitization, viewing facilities, and research support to be provided by a small staff. The ability to provide digital transfer services and storage for rare and important films is unique in the region.

Creation of For-Profit Archive: The richness of the film images from the Middle East and North Africa regions are of great value to broadcasters world-wide. High resolution scans of the films can be licensed for use by networks, production companies, and institutions.

Any profits would help support the operating budget of the archive and be overseen by a Board of Trustees and its investors.

For a detailed timeline and budget, please contact the Project Coordinator at the address below.

Conclusion

The Arab Film Heritage Archive will be the first of its kind. A truly open archive that combines the power of the collaborate online networks and industry standard preservation techniques.

We believe the importance of the films in this collection and the unique advantages of the database will make the Archive a popular and powerful resource for anyone interested in the culture and history of the Middle East.

Please consider supporting in any way that you can. For more information, please contact the Project Coordinator. We look forward to working with you.

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