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Fossati, G.

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For a global approach to audiovisual heritage: A plea for North/South exchange in research and practice

Giovanna Fossati

In the digital space, an alarming misrepresentation of our global audiovisual heritage is occurring. Whereas audiovisual archives and research institutions in the Global North (in particular Europe and North America) are eagerly digitising their own national heritage, their counterparts in the Global South (low- and middle-income countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America) are just at the beginning of the digitisation process.[1] As a consequence, heritage from the Global South is hardly visible for audiences online, and therefore most researchers and curators focus on audiovisual collections that are preserved, digitised, and made accessible by those Global North archives with a digital infrastructure in place. The Covid-19 pandemic and catastrophic events caused by climate change have made global disparity even clearer.

We all know the clock is ticking as audiovisual heritage that is not digitised in the near future, even when it is preserved in analog form, risks becoming invisible: not mapped, not researched, not curated, not seen.[2] This affects the historical and cultural representation of different societies and their collective memory and impairs a broader understanding of the diversity of archival practices.

What can we researchers and archivists do to turn the tide? First of all, it is crucial to overcome national perspectives and unite under a more global vision of our field. Recent tragedies such as the fire at Cinemateca Brasileira in Sao Paulo and the unknown fate of Afghan Film in Kabul have already prompted our community to do so.[3] The increasing demand for the online presence of audiovisual heritage collections from researchers, curators, and

the larger audience potentially offers a good opportunity to rethink representation and inclusion of global audiovisual heritage and re-balance access across borders and economies.

A radical change in approach to research and practice is needed before it is too late:

- Researchers and professionals involved in audiovisual archiving worldwide need to work together and develop new approaches to make digitisation practice and related research activities an all-inclusive endeavour.
- In this effort, sustainable practices and standards for digitisation and digital preservation for the Global South and environmentally friendly and community-based alternatives in terms of policies and practices for the Global North should be explored.
- New archival methodologies should be developed that are informed by specific contexts, leading to a novel global audiovisual archival theory for guiding research and curatorship aimed at preservation, presentation, and access.
- Finally, a solid basis to promote long-term knowledge exchange between scholars and archivists of both regions should be established.

Such a highly ambitious agenda requires further contextualisation.

In recent years many audiovisual archives and research institutions in the Global North have been actively digitising, however mainly focusing on their own national heritage. Examples of such endeavours in the non-profit sphere are the project Images for the Future in the Netherlands, the Media Digitization and Preservation Initiative at Indiana University, and the project Unlocking the Film Heritage at the British Film Institute[4]. Although only a fraction of the analog audiovisual collections have been digitised so far, these initiatives have helped set up digital infrastructures, knowledge centres, and workflows that will allow steady progress in the digitisation and digital access of collections, mainly carried out on a national level.[5]

In Europe audiovisual archives and museums are often subsidised and have a solid relationship with national funding entities. That is why most heritage institutions have built their preservation policy around concepts of national heritage. Although many audiovisual archives and museums in their preservation activities also include foreign films that have had an influence on national (film) culture, the practice is based on criteria of quality (e.g. 'film as art') as developed in the European context and relevant for a specific na-

tional cultural heritage. With the on-going discussion on decolonising archives and museum collections, and the rising concern for a diverse and inclusive representation in the cultural sector, things are changing, but at a very slow pace.

It is about time that film archives and museums start addressing questions such as: How would a global approach change audiovisual archival practices (acquisition, selection, cataloguing, preservation, restoration, access, curation, presentation, etc.)?; How would it affect the programming of film museums and streaming platforms?; What kind of content would be available online for audiences, education, and re-use if online access would truly represent a global film history?

Most importantly, to obtain a representation of global audiovisual culture within the programming of cinematheques, festivals, and, more generally, online, we need to increase the (digital) availability of films from underrepresented countries and support a structural system of collaboration and exchange between film archives worldwide. Finally, archivists across the world should closely collaborate on developing policies and practices for digitisation, digital preservation, and access that are also practical and sustainable for archives with limited resources, including non-institutional ones.[6]

As audiovisual heritage from the Global South is mostly invisible for researchers, it is unfortunately also excluded from research projects. Therefore, in the last two decades, research on the cultural, political, economic, and practical consequences of the digitisation of audiovisual archives in Europe and North America led to theory formation focussing solely on developments in the Global North, based on film and media frameworks that originate from European and North American theoretical discourses.[7]

This has also been the case with my own research in the transition from analog to digital in film archives and the underlying theoretical frameworks. At first I accepted the exclusion of researching theories and practices outside Europe and North America as a necessary choice of scope.[8] Later on, I have become increasingly frustrated with this limitation, to the point that today I consider filling this gap as the most important challenge for the entire audiovisual field, from researchers to archivists. In this light, I have pointed out that preservation, restoration, digitisation, and curation priorities in most audiovisual archives go hand in hand with still dominant theoretical perspectives that can be roughly identified with a 'film as art' and/or a Monument-approach to collections.[9] In the academic field these approaches have long

been reconsidered, but they are still central to the institutional strategy and national subsidies rationales from which institutions can hardly escape.

In terms of research, we need to realise that a clearer understanding of the current situation is necessary, which starts from mapping the archives operating in the Global South – but also non-institutional and diaspora archives in the Global North – and assess the status of their current practices regarding digitisation and digital preservation. Also, new theoretical frameworks, which include a more diverse conception of 'heritage' are to be developed that include principles of decolonisation and that transcend traditional conceptions revolving around national cinema, auteurist approaches, and film-as-art discourse.

But above all, we need to create a basis to promote long term North-South exchange of knowledge and learning, and a discussion platform for sharing practices between audiovisual scholars and archivists of both regions. Some very important and exemplary projects should be mentioned here that have already pointed towards a different, more global and collaborative approach to film archival practice and research. Among others, I would like to mention: the work by Juana Suarez, both in her research into audiovisual archives in Latin America and in her leading role in the Audiovisual Preservation Exchange (APEX) project, promoted by New York University since 2008; the collaboration between the University of Jos, the Nigerian Film Corporation, the Goethe University, the Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum, and Arsenal Institute for Film and Video Art; the work by Aboubakar Sanogo, among others, for the African Film Heritage Project, a partnership between FEPACI, the Film Foundation, and UNESCO; the collaborative efforts carried out by FIAF, both in terms of training and support; the Archive/Counter-Archive project in Canada; and, finally, long-standing non-institutional initiatives such as June Givanni's Pan African Cinema Archive, which are leading the way to a more horizontal and global approach to audiovisual archiving.[10]

Following important recent events dealing with this subject matter, such as the panel 'Socio-political Diversity of Film Archives: Transitions from the Past to the Future' moderated by Maral Mohsenin during the 2019 FIAF Symposium, the Inward/Outward Symposium (2020) at the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, and the After the Archive Symposium (2021), organised by Arsenal and Goethe-Universität Frankfurt,[11] the upcoming 7th Eye International Conference will be entirely dedicated to the topic 'Global Audiovisual Archiving: North-South Exchange in Knowledge and Practices'.[12] The conference, a collaboration between Eye Filmmuseum,

the University of Amsterdam, and the Association of Moving Image Archivists, intends to gather speakers and participants from very diverse realities (both institutional and others) worldwide and aims at creating a platform for the long-term North-South exchange of knowledge and learning that is so much needed.

Author

Giovanna Fossati is Professor of Film Heritage and Digital Film Culture at the University of Amsterdam where she has taught in the MA program Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image since it was established in 2003. She is also the Chief Curator at Eye Filmmuseum (Amsterdam) where she supervises a collection of more than 50,000 titles.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1]   Here the rough categories 'Global North' and 'Global South' are used for lack of better definitions. However, these are problematic terms as they convey a sense of 'geographic determinism' (see http://re-design.dimiter.eu/?p=969 – accessed 1 October 2021) and need to be replaced by more precise descriptions of the specific cultural and geographical contexts that are discussed. It should also be noted that a similar unbalance exists within Global North countries between institutional and non-institutional (and/or counter) archives. Furthermore, the use of the term 'heritage' is equally problematic due to its connection to the idea of national identity within the Western audiovisual archival discourse (refer to Frick 2011).

[2]   I feel it is necessary to mention the importance of not confusing digitisation with preservation. Indeed, digitising audiovisual collections without a solid preservation strategy for both the analog originals and the digital masters will in no way guarantee their long-term preservation. Also, digital preservation requires important investment in terms of equipment, expertise, and long-term migration strategies that can be prohibitively expensive, even for privileged archives. However, here I want to focus on the urgency to make a more global and inclusive audiovisual heritage visible through digital access, as I strongly believe that privileging preservation should not prevent access.

[3]   https://www.indiewire.com/2021/07/brazilian-cinematheque-fire-1234654692/ (accessed 1 October 2021); https://deadline.com/2021/08/taliban-terror-afghanistan-filmmakers-titantic-sahara-karimi-films-1234822178/ (accessed 1 October 2021). See the letters by the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) and the Association of European Cinematheques (ACE) in response to the fire at Cinemateca Brasileira: https://www.fiafnet.org/pages/News/FIAF-Statement-Cinemateca-Brasileira-07-2021.html (accessed 7 October 2021); https://ace-film.eu/ace-expresses-its-professional-support-to-the-cinemateca-brasileira/ (accessed 7 October 2021).

[4]   https://publications.beeldengeluid.nl/pub/498/BVDT_EN.pdf; https://mdpi.iu.edu (accessed 7 October 2021); and https://www2.bfi.org.uk/britain-on-film/unlocking-film-heritage (accessed 7 October 2021).

[5]   Fossati 2018, pp. 136-137; Özgen and Rongen-Kaynakçi, 2021.

[6]   At the same time, policies and practices currently embraced by many archives in the Global North should be revised by looking for alternatives that are environmentally friendly and community based. A case in point is the on-going discussion on film restoration and its focus on high digital film resolutions (2K, 4K, 6K, 8K…) as the golden standard for the field. Such standards are only sustainable for a very small number of commercial and national archives, mainly based in the Global North. And, even in those cases, the long-term digital preservation of entire digital collections at such high standards might become unsustainable. Hence, reconsidering digitisation standards in view of a more global approach to audiovisual heritage and of a sustainable strategy for long-term (digital) preservation is necessary and urgent for the field.

[7]   Cherchi Usai et al. 2008; Fossati 2009, 2018; Frick 2011; Bordwell 2012.

[8]   Fossati 2001, 2009.

[9] Fossati 2018, pp. 331-337.

[10] Suarez 2011, Suarez et al. 2018, https://tisch.nyu.edu/cinema-studies/miap/research-out-reach/apex (accessed 1 October 2021); Hediger et al. 2021 and https://www.goethe-university-frankfurt.de/74993129/Film_degree_programme_to_be_exported_to_Nigeria (accessed 1 October 2021); Sanogo 2018 and https://www.film-foundation.org/afhp-next (accessed 1 October 2021); https://www.fiafnet.org/pages/Training/FIAF-Training-Outreach-Programme.html (accessed 1 October 2021); https://counterarchive.ca/ (accessed 1 October 2021); http://www.junegivannifilmarchive.com (accessed 1 October 2021).

[11] https://www.fiafnet.org/pages/Events/2019-Lausanne-Symposium-Session5.html (accessed 7 October 2021); https://www.beeldengeluid.nl/en/visit/events/inward-outward-symposium (accessed 7 October 2021); https://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/living-archive/projects/archive-ausser-sich-2017-2020/archival-assembly-1/program/after-the-archive.html (accessed 7 October 2021); https://www.eyefilm.nl/en/whats-on/masterclass-global-audiovisual-archiving-north-south-exchange-in-knowledge-and-practices/347620 (accessed 7 October 2021).

[12] See the online roundtable on this topic: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWWcvMFDOFM (accessed 3 October 2021). More information available here: . https://www.eyefilm.nl/en/pro-gramme/eye-international-conference-2022/563352 (accessed 17 November 2021).