

**The Bibliotheca Alexandria and the preservation of  
Egypt's visual cultural heritage**

Introduction to MIAP

Yasmin Desouki

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Alexandria, Egypt is a city that has undergone various transformations throughout the centuries since its founding by Alexander the Great in 331 BC. It stumbled into economic stagnation and disrepair under Ottoman rule, only to be rediscovered in the 1880s by Mohammed Ali Pasha, whose push for industrialization and social reform led to the city's most recent reincarnation as the cosmopolitan center of the entire Mediterranean. This "golden age" of ethnic and cultural diversity lasted between the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the once forgotten city flourished both economically and artistically, producing countless writers, dancers, painters, filmmakers, and actors from diverse backgrounds. The Egyptian cinema industry began in Alexandria as it was the site of the first film screening in 1896: the Lumiere Brothers' film was shown in a café in the district of Tousson Bourse, and almost immediately, cinema halls were established where short films from all around the world were shown on a regular basis, mobilizing the city's artists to begin work on their own motion picture productions. The very first type of filmmaking practice to be explored in Egyptian cinema was the documentary, and Alexandrians used it extensively to capture the city's renaissance and its various ethnic communities. The majority of these films and newsreels now reside in the archives of the Bibliotheca Alexandria, where they play a vital role in the library's attempt to chronicle the cultural heritage of the city. This paper will provide a survey of the library's audiovisual archives, its mission statement, cataloging practices, how new acquisitions are handled, access, policies and procedures, funding, and copyright issues. A general overview of the problems faced by scholars and preservationists of Egyptian cinema will also be introduced in an attempt to posit the multimedia library in the Bibliotheca Alexandria as the first substantial effort to provide an exemplary conservationist model for the country's visual heritage.

## **THE NEW BIBLIOTHECA ALEXANDRIA**

The idea of reviving the ancient library of Alexandria had been floating around since 1974, when a committee set up by the Alexandria University selected a plot of land for its new library, between the campus and the seafront, close to where the ancient library once stood. The notion of recreating the ancient library was soon enthusiastically adopted by other individuals and agencies throughout Egypt. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was quick to embrace the idea of endowing the Mediterranean region with a center of cultural and scientific excellence, and the project was well underway by the late 1980s. UNESCO, in conjunction with the presidency of Hosni Mubarak, organized an architectural competition in 1988 calling for designs that would live up to the country's cultural and scientific heritage. The competition was won by Snøhetta, a Norwegian architectural firm, and in 1990 a conference was held in Aswan to help the government figure out the logistics of funding such a costly project. Sixty-five million dollars was pledged by various agencies, mainly from the Gulf Arab states. Construction on the library's complex began in 1995, and after two-hundred and twenty million dollars in total was spent, the Bibliotheca Alexandria officially opened on October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2002.

The dimensions of the library are vast, and its design has been heralded as the perfect translation of the old, "adequate for crossing the frontiers and meeting the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (El Sahn, 2). The library has shelf space for approximately eight million books, with the main reading room covering seventy thousand squared meters on eleven levels. The Bibliotheca Alexandria houses various conference and research centers, specialized libraries for children and the blind, three museums, four art galleries, a planetarium, and a manuscript restoration laboratory (El Sahn, 3-8). The collections at the Bibliotheca were donated from

countries all around the world, with Spain donating documents that detailed the ruling of the Arabs in Andalusia, and France giving manuscripts dealing with the building of the Suez Canal. The library has also undertaken rather ambitious projects since its inception, such as obtaining and maintaining a copy of the Internet Archive, preserving and digitizing ancient manuscripts, creating the Alex-Med Research Center and the Center for Documentation of Cultural Natural Heritage (CULTNAT), built and deployed an Information and Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure, organizing the digital archive of the Gamal Abdel Nasser Collection, creating a website dedicated to the history of cinema in Alexandria, and presenting the first ever complete digital version of the *Description de l’Egypt*, amongst many other projects (Library Annual Report, 26-58). The cinematic materials residing in the multimedia section of the library (which are the subject of this paper) have largely been donated by filmmaker’s families, or were formerly housed in the state’s archives, which the library soon acquired after its inauguration.

The library’s mission is to become a “unique admired research institution, a haven for scholars worldwide to produce their quality work of excellence” (El Sahn, 3). The Bibliotheca Alexandria seeks to play an active role in broadening the country’s cultural, social, and economic development, and to encourage further cooperation between east and west. According to the website, the “four-pronged” approach of the library’s official statement of purpose is as follows:

- Window of Egypt on the world
- Window of the world on Egypt
- A library for the digital age

- A center for dialogue and debate

These points clearly provide the framework for the library's collection strategy and how it defines itself amongst other national libraries. The first priority for the administration of the Bibliotheca Alexandria is to acquire broad collections regarding Egypt--especially Alexandria and the ancient library—and documenting the modern history of the country. Collections about the Mediterranean Region and Africa are also covered, but special care is taken to ensure that a “duplication of efforts” (El Sahn, 3) is not produced.

Despite the library's growth within the past few years, its various endeavors have been met with substantial criticism. For some, the question of whether or not Egypt can afford to supply such a vast library with all the materials it needs is a major issue, and the fact that most of the funding for this public academic institution is provided by Arab states and companies in the Gulf seems problematic. Also, there are some who are uncertain about the library's ability to avoid censorship from the stringent Egyptian government (Vaidhyanathan, 17-20). All these problems aside, it does seem as though positive steps have been taken to maintain the library's integrity as an open academic unit. Much has been made amongst the international community of librarians of the BA's Multimedia Library, and the work they have done with regards to Egyptian cinema will be the focus of this survey.

### **EGYPT'S NATIONAL FILM ARCHIVE**

It would be extremely difficult to explicate the audiovisual activities of the Bibliotheca Alexandria without first providing a brief background on the issues facing conservationists of Egyptian cinema. Unlike most developing countries, Egypt has a well-established film heritage.

The Lumiere brothers organized film screenings in the cafes of Cairo and Alexandria as far back as 1896, and shortly afterwards film began to be made in Egypt, at first by foreigners, and then by Egyptians from 1927 onwards (Shafik, 15-18). Surprisingly, many “old films have been preserved or rediscovered in spite of the absence of provisions for mandatory deposit in the past...due to private initiatives which were praiseworthy but imperfect and necessarily incomplete” (Osman, 1). Misr Studios, founded in 1935 by the Egyptian economic and industrial pioneer, Talaat Harb, played a vital role in the field of preservation. When the studios were created, storage facilities were built for the preservation of both newsreel and feature films. However, the studio’s laudable work was undercut when a fire caused by the negligence of a janitor ravaged part of the Studios in July 1950, notably affecting the archive premises.

A growing awareness of the problem of film preservation in the mid-1950s led to the creation of the Egyptian Film Archive by the Office of the Arts, and in the same year, Egypt participated in the work of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAP). Unfortunately, another fire in August 1958, caused by the spontaneous combustion of nitrate film, destroyed part of the collection which had been assembled from gifts of Egyptian and foreign films, and works seized by Customs. Soon after, in 1968, the Ministry of Culture was persuaded to establish a mandatory deposit obligation. However, this decree was not backed up sufficiently by private producers as the government had hoped, and the archive ceased all its activities in 1971.

A legislation was finally passed in 1975 which required all producers and distributors to jointly deposit at the Film Archive (now known as the National Archives) a 35mm copy made

at their own expense of any film produced for public showing in Egypt or elsewhere (Osman, 2). This measure ensured that most of Egypt's moving images were conserved properly, and the archiving system—while imperfect in many ways—set an important precedent for the cinema of that country. Initial application problems have been overcome, and the practice of mandatory deposit is satisfactorily carried out since copies are subject to quality control.

Hence, it is a well-established fact that, despite the lack of funding and the disorganization of the Ministry of Culture's archival practices, most of the treasures of Egyptian cinema remain intact. The two biggest problems facing Egyptian film historians are: 1) The absence of a set, detailed cataloging system, and 2) Distribution and the threat presented by satellite television channels in the Middle East.

In 2004, Prince al-Walid bin Talal, a Saudi billionaire, bought seventy percent of Egypt's cinematic heritage (including eight hundred negatives of classic movies dating as far back as 1935) to air on a new satellite movie channel. Many "Egyptians now fear that the day will come when ordinary citizens will not be able to watch the classical movies of their all-time favorite stars" (Shahine, 36) since only relatively affluent families can afford satellite television. The press attacked the acquisition at the time, not only because the materials were now in the hands of foreigners who make millions of dollars airing Egyptian entertainment on their channels, but also because they felt that trusting the private sector with such material would further jeopardize Egyptian cinema should the company decide to sell the movies to other foreign investors. Just as ancient Egyptian artifacts have been sold and squandered over time throughout the world, the country's films have met the same fate: foreigners now own and control nearly one-third of cinematic history.

The financial details of the deal were shrouded in secrecy, and it seems almost impossible to learn more about the impetus behind the acquisition (Shahine, 38). However, an official from the Cairo-branch of the Saudi owned company, Rotana, speaking on the condition of anonymity to Al-Jazeera, said that the company also bought some 180 new releases, with a view of launching a free-to-air satellite movie channel in the summer of 2004, and it plans to sell the airing rights of these movies to other channels (Doros, 2). While Rotana and the prince's other partners have denied the accusations, these developments are nonetheless disheartening to preservationists and lovers of Egyptian cinema. The absence of anti-monopoly laws in Egypt are another source of serious concern since there is no real way of ensuring that big-money corporations in the Gulf do not end up swallowing all of Egypt's film history as well as current releases. This would inevitably prevent ordinary Egyptians who cannot afford access to satellite television (approximately eighty percent of the population), from watching their own movies should Rotana decide to limit the airing of the films to their own channels. For a people whose lives have been enriched and shaped by iconic film stars, the gravity of the situation cannot be underestimated.

Rotana and the Egyptian Culture of Ministry have defended their position by stating that the deal relieved the government from the expensive cost of maintaining and restoring the movies (Doros, 2). Since Egyptian cinema has depended on foreign distributors in the past (namely the French, such as the producer Humber Baslan who was instrumental in funding and presenting the works of Youssef Chahine and Yousry Nasrallah to the international film circuit), Arab and Egyptian investors do not view the acquisition as a substantial threat. Regardless, the question of how a country is expected to preserve and catalog its filmic heritage without actually having the original copies has yet to be answered.



The Egyptian Film Center, based in Giza, Egypt, has continued acquiring and modifying its archival practice despite these challenges. The center includes the administrative facilities of the Egyptian Film Industry, the Festival Organization Department, Documentary and Experimental Departments, amongst many others. The Center also comprises the Department of Film Culture, the High Cinema Institute, a development and printing library, as well as the Egyptian National Film Archive (Di Martino, 39). In 2001, the Egyptian National Film Archive acquired twenty-eight long-features, sixteen short films and documentaries, and twenty-four new films for a total of 1773 stored prints, with the addition of 1758 prints stored in Al Ahram warehouses (Doros, 2). Every year the archive catalogues around seventy features which are stored in suitable premises; an admirable growth rate considering the numerous hindrances facing the artistic community in general. These materials are stored along with an additional collection of 400-long features and 250 documentaries of “different origin,” namely from foreign countries.

The activities of the Egyptian Film Center sound promising, but unfortunately the organization has been plagued with numerous legal, financial, and technical problems. For one, not all the copies are of good screening quality. Only about 1200 conform to the technical standards to which a modern cinematic audience is accustomed. Also, while the Center has numerous books about film history, there aren't many reviews, press kits, posters, scripts, and other materials since the agent for each film often fails to submit them.

The law passed in 1975, which was explicated earlier in this paper, attempted to oblige every filmmaker to deposit a 35 mm copy of every Egyptian film produced before its official release. However, there have been numerous documentations of this law being circumvented

or ignored altogether, since there seems to be little follow-up on the Center's administrative level. Further compounding the problem is that the National Film Archive does not possess its own budget since it is a subsidiary of the Egyptian Film Center, and this significantly undercuts the archive's preservation and conservation processes. For example, the deposit and differentiating process of the films and creating CRT copies is problematic, and the issue has also been well-documented by FIAF (Di Martino, 45). The storage conditions are passably good at best, and the inability to acquire enough funding to sustain a cold climate (which is particularly difficult to maintain in a country as hot and humid as Egypt) significantly compromise the quality of work produced by the archives preservationists.

While the technical state of films are recorded and cataloged, the means by which this is done can be considered quite antiquated by the archival standards of today. A set record-keeping system is established which catalogues the nitrate degradation and color fading in the collection, but with only twenty employees running the show, the implementation of sufficient record keeping is often questionable. In addition, some of the films need cleaning and restoration, but due to a lack of cleaning equipment, this crucial part of the restoration process has to be outsourced to an independent company (Di Martino, 48).

The National Film Archive does, however, provide important resources to scholars, such as a lending system which allows individuals to check-out some of its holdings, and continuous screenings open to the general public. On the downside, the Archive is not a self-sufficient entity, and it has little control over the copyright and distribution of the films in its holdings (Di Martino, 50). The director of the Archive, Aly Abou Shady, is hoping to improve the situation by making Egypt an official member of FIAF, creating and maintaining a website

with a visual archive of the materials thereby increasing awareness about the importance of preserving the country's cinematic heritage, changing the laws regarding the preservation of CRL, construct an independent building for the archive to contain projection halls and studios for the transfer of the VHS and CDs, and raising the efficiency of restoration and preservation by controlling storing circumstances according to international descriptions and acquiring restoration and preservation equipment (Di Martino, 50). It is against this background information regarding the current developments in Egyptian cinema that I would like to posit the activities of the Multimedia Library of the Bibliotheca Alexandria.

### **THE MULTIMEDIA LIBRARY AT THE BIBLIOTHECA ALEXANDRIA**

The multimedia division of the Bibliotheca Alexandria opened to the public approximately ten months after the launch of the main library in 2002. The division's services are tailored to meet the library's mission statement and remain consistent with the policies and procedures set by the administration. The Multimedia library located on the third basement floor and holds a wide range of audiovisual materials from numerous fields, and its major roles is to document and preserve the valuable material for heritage and new technology (El Sahn, 5). This documentation is archived by recording and cataloging not only the acquired collection, but also noting the events, conferences, and other scholarly activities associated with the work in question. The library's collection consists of print and non-print material related to Egyptian cinema, music, and theater, various digital resources such as CDs and DVDs, a copy of the Internet Archive, and a separate online archive worth two thousand hours of Egyptian and US television broadcasts. As Marwa El Sahn, the director of the multimedia division, states: "the main priority is the allocation of resources to cover Alexandria, Egypt, the

Middle East and Arab World, the Mediterranean region, Africa, and finally the rest of the world in a non-print digital format rather than an analogue format” (El Sahn, 5). While the Bibliotheca in general is more oriented towards the digital and electronic formats, the institution still faces great challenges in the areas of copyright issues and conservation of the materials in electronic format.

The library is fully aware of the numerous problems it faces with the archiving and preservation of its entire collection (especially film), and it has taken substantial measures to continually educate and train its staff so that they can keep up with the standards set by the Bibliotheca. Human resources development and special training are stressed by the library’s administration (El Sahn, 6-8) since it is essential to cultivate the technical and managerial skills of the staff to be able to acquire new technologies and equipment:

“Special subject training for librarians are conducted to make staff aware about librarian’s tools such as DDC (Dewey Decimal Classification), LCSH (Library of Congress Subject Heading), Rameau (Repertoire d’Autorite-matiere encyclopedique et alphabetique unifie), MARC21 (Machine-Readable Cataloging)” (El Sahn, 6).

In addition, language training is of particular importance to the librarians and archivists at the Bibliotheca Alexandria since staff are required to understand the various materials and communicate with users in different languages. Lectures and symposiums are an essential part of the library’s vital intellectual scene, and conferences related to music, cinema, and theatre are organized on a regular basis.

Unlike the Egyptian Film Archive, the library’s in-depth cataloging system and its focus on presenting new research and raising awareness about the country’s heritage has helped to foster and increase scholarly interest in Egyptian cinema. While the library stresses works made

by Alexandrian filmmakers and artists, its practices have set a positive precedent in the world of Egyptian archiving and preservation in that its organized and often insightful activities help raise the profile of Egypt's audiovisual heritage as a whole. With the launch of its *AlexCinema* website in 2006, a rather informative and easy to navigate site that provides an excellent introduction to the birth of cinema in Alexandria with articles, photographs, production stills, posters, and film excerpts, the Egyptian Film Center has tried to follow suit and create its own website that would be as successful and methodical. For Egyptian film historians, such activities are a significant sign that things are beginning to change. To be fair, the Bibliotheca Alexandria possess considerable monetary resources since donations from different entities stream in rather steadily, whereas the Egyptian Film Archive sustains itself on the budget allotted to it by the Ministry of Culture. It is also important to note a certain irony in the Bibliotheca Alexandria's inception: approximately sixty percent of its funding originates from big-business money in the Arab Gulf states; the very same entities who had obtained the majority of Egypt's cinematic heritage only a few years ago.

Since the Bibliotheca Alexandria is a vast cultural academic institution that acquires materials from all around the world, copyright is an especially pertinent subject. The library's policy regarding legality and clearance relies heavily on the guidelines set up by national and international legislation, as well as various organizations, depending on where and how the material was obtained. Licenses for the library are issued by first obtaining a clearance letter from each producer to allow the Bibliotheca the rights to produce copies, use in public for free, add covers in posters, loan audiovisual material to individuals and institutions, take shots or part of the document and make copies for users, convert to alternative formats, etc. (El Sahn,

7). It is difficult to deduce whether the library's acquisitions are indeed handled in such a streamlined, organized manner, or if simply the process is far more transparent than other academic institutions in Egypt. Regardless, it is clear that the relatively young library is following a rather strident set of rules that heretofore have been neglected in similar administrative establishments.

All the audiovisual materials are included in the general catalogue of the library to provide maximum information for usage (El Sahn, 7). The cataloguing information includes an abstract, title, production dates, important names (actors, directors, etc.), conferences or events organized by the library about the work, and so on. Digitizing and preservation are one of the division's top priorities, be it in print format or electronic. The Multimedia Library began a project in 2003 to digitize photos with a slide collection, and this will be catalogued on both Virtua and Mmediaview database, making it accessible for the users from the Bibliotheca Alexandria OPAC (El Sahn, 8). Another project the library is investing heavily in is converting their video collection to DVD in order to play them via the server in different locations, "taking into consideration copyright issues" (El Sahn, 8).

As briefly stated earlier, one of the problems faced by the Multimedia Library is the issue of cataloging: since they receive donations from all around the world and in different languages, the librarians consistently revise their mode of conduct: "The original cataloging of these materials is difficult. The copy cataloging cannot be considered as a reliable solution because these materials are rarely available in union catalogues and utilities such as the OCLC...the holding libraries of these titles...rarely use MARC formats and sometimes don't offer downloading options for their records" (El Sahn, 10).

Ultimately, whether or not the Bibliotheca Alexandria will be able to follow through with its ambitious plans remains to be seen, but its impact on the conservation of multimedia material in Egypt has already been felt. The timeframe given for this project has curtailed one's ability to fully understand the library's holdings and its operations, but it can be assumed from the primary and secondary works referenced in this paper that the Bibliotheca's treatment of Egypt's audiovisual heritage is progressive and effective enough for the general public as well as scholars of different disciplines.

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