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The European film archives and cinémathèques have as their core mission to preserve, document and make available the film history and film culture of the past and present.

The film archives have a long tradition for heritage screenings of analogue films. This tradition is challenged by the digitization of cinema, and new models for quality screenings of historically important films will need to be developed for the digital era. The financial challenges facing film archives, regarding both preservation and screening of film heritage in connection with the change to digital, are substantial.

The European film archives hold significant amounts of moving images documenting the life, history and human expression of more than a century. These films are typically held as the original analogue film reels that remain the best preservation media for this unique historical resource. Digitization of these films is both costly, and should not be taken lightly in regards to retention of authenticity and the context in which they were created. It is essential that these images and sounds are not merely regarded as content, but rather as the original documents and artifacts they are.

Copyright clearance of motion pictures is complex. Often several authors are involved in the creation of a specific work. The transfer of rights and neighboring rights add to the confusion. A recent study puts a large number of films in the orphans category, which largely prevents them from being utilized or even shown. Film archives do not have the resources to clear copyright at large, but do so as it is needed for ad hoc display purposes. If film archives are to facilitate rights clearance on a larger scale, either significant funds to do so, or clearer legislation with non-commercial fair use exemptions, is needed.

There is a great cultural and educational potential in the digitization and online availability of the cinematographic heritage. However, much of the film heritage will need contextualization in order to facilitate use beyond a mere curiosity level. As cinematographic works are typically "high production value", they can be expected to retain interest across borders, if appropriate contextualization and translation is provided.

Even though digital "business models" are expected to develop rapidly over the next years, it would be naïve to think that broad digitization of the film heritage can carry its own weight, or even create a substantial income for the heritage institutions. Digitization of the film heritage should be a cultural investment with the purpose of giving better public access to European heritage.

Private commercial re-use of digitized heritage could be an added benefit of easier access, but digitization projects should not be dependent on it. Public heritage institutions should continue to receive ample public funds to both preserve and present Europe's heritage as financially independent non-profit institutions.