

***The Forbidden Reel.*** Documentary, directed by Ariel Nasr. Loaded Pictures and National Film Board of Canada, 2019. 120 min. (2K DCP). DOXA 2020 Documentary Film Festival, Vancouver and online, June 18–26, 2020; Hot Docs Festival Online, Toronto and online, May 28 – June 24, 2020.

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Afghan-Canadian filmmaker Ariel Nasr's 2019 documentary, *The Forbidden Reel*, takes a close look at the activities and film archives of Afghan Film, Afghanistan's national film production institute. Active since the late 1960s, Afghan Film supports and promotes Afghan filmmaking and maintains an archive of films dating back to the 1920s, although most of the films were made between 1946 and 1996, when the Taliban captured Kabul and put the Afghan film industry and its history under threat. *The Forbidden Reel* stitches together archival clips of Afghan life on film; stills from behind the scenes of film shoots; historical re-enactments; and interviews with actors, filmmakers, and others involved with production and restoration to offer viewers a layered representation of Afghanistan's history through its film industry. Nasr's interviewees discuss the meaning and importance of moving images – as idea, art, and imagination – as they view glorious and inspiring representations of their country and its people over time. The history of the medium is evident in the appearance of the clips on screen: according to one interviewee, Soviet projectors common in the country in the 1980s were large and clunky and left long scratches on the films in the archive – scratches that are still evident in the digitized films.



FIGURE 1 *Film still from The Forbidden Reel, co-produced by Loaded Pictures and the National Film Board of Canada, directed by Ariel Nasr. Source: NFB*



FIGURE 2 *Film still from The Forbidden Reel, co-produced by Loaded Pictures and the National Film Board of Canada, directed by Ariel Nasr. Source: NFB*



FIGURE 3 *Film still from The Forbidden Reel, co-produced by Loaded Pictures and the National Film Board of Canada, directed by Ariel Nasr. Source: NFB*

Filmmaking in Afghanistan experienced a golden age from the mid-1970s into the 1980s. After Afghanistan's communist revolution, government funding for fiction films increased, women entered the workforce, and more roles for women were developed. During the Soviet-Afghan war, the mujahedeen resistance had a film unit, which saw filmmakers bring skills they developed while working with Afghan Film to the frontlines. This was often difficult and dangerous work. As one interviewee recounts, filmmakers risked being fired at by communists in the mountains, who mistook zoom lenses for weapons. In order to have their films made, directors often had to convince actors that their projects were personal and not destined for state propaganda. Nasr's film shows how, throughout the country's recent history, Afghan filmmakers have captured images of conflict unfolding around them but also how they have stayed true to their independent, creative visions, despite the conflicts and despite who was funding their projects.

This was true even during the civil war in Kabul, when the country had no functioning government. As the Taliban took control of the country in the 1990s, government funding for filmmaking was cut. The limited budget of Afghan Film resulted in a few staff watching over a neglected space without electricity or



FIGURE 4 Film still from *The Forbidden Reel*, co-produced by Loaded Pictures and the National Film Board of Canada, directed by Ariel Nasr. Source: NFB

equipment – appalling preservation conditions that threatened the films’ survival and were amplified by the actions of ideological members of government, who hated film, closed down theatres, and forbade women from starring in movies. At one point in *The Forbidden Reel*, the camera focuses on the ceiling of Afghan Film’s office space, showing evidence of leaks and even a bird’s nest. This government animosity extended to Afghan Film’s archive, in part because of the historical representations of women depicted in its films. The documentary recounts how, in response to a tip-off about a forthcoming raid by a Taliban minister, Afghan Film staff risked their lives to hide and de-identify films in an attempt to save them from destruction. These same staff members, together with others, like artist and professor Mariam Ghani, speak passionately about their work to restore these films by cleaning and cataloguing them, labelling them, rehusing them in canisters, adding leader tape, and eventually digitizing them. Almost 2,500 films were nearly lost. Many require a great deal of restoration work in order to ensure their preservation going forward. This is often a difficult task; the facilities and equipment required for this work are expensive and not always easily available.

In “Research without Archives?: The Making and Remaking of Area Studies Knowledge of the Middle East in a Time of Chronic War,”<sup>1</sup> Laila Hussein Moustafa discusses the challenges experienced by scholars interested in accessing materials housed in war-torn regions. She describes the results of her research into the impacts of war on Middle Eastern area studies and into the disaster planning activities of national libraries and archives located in areas of regular conflict. Moustafa questions whether it is possible to create knowledge about a region when its archival records and its human scholars and storytellers are under significant threat. Quoting Leonard Binder, Moustafa concludes that “true knowledge is only possible of things that exist,” adding that, “in the Middle East at least, archives are at a risk of disappearing.”<sup>2</sup> Issues raised in *The Forbidden Reel* echo those explored by Moustafa’s work.

Moustafa ends her article with a call for archivists and librarians in both Western and Middle Eastern countries to work together to preserve and help digitize materials under threat in politically unstable regions. The archivists and filmmakers involved in the Afghan Film restoration work – including those from Afghanistan, Canada, and the US – exemplify the type of project Moustafa is arguing for.<sup>3</sup> *The Forbidden Reel* also shows how successful such a collaboration can be. Nasr spent five years watching films projected in a small screening room in Afghanistan while working on this project. He contributed to their preservation by supporting the digitization of clips at the National Film Board of Canada, in Montreal, with the help of conservation supervisor Marie France Rousseau. This work supported a larger digitization plan created and enacted by Afghan Film. In the film, Mariam Ghani talks about the importance of making many copies, and putting copies into the hands of as many people as possible, as the best strategy for keeping a film safe from loss (echoing Stanford University’s LOCKSS program).<sup>4</sup> As long as a country is politically unstable, Ghani warns, films in a national archival institution will be at risk. Nasr’s film, which

1 See Laila Hussein Moustafa, “Research without Archives?: The Making and Remaking of Area Studies Knowledge of the Middle East in a Time of Chronic War,” *Archivaria* 85 (Spring 2018): 68–95, <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/issue/view/470>.

2 *Ibid.*, 87.

3 Moustafa specifically calls for projects related to Middle Eastern archives. Afghanistan is on the crossroads of South and Central Asia and is sometimes included in lists of countries comprising the Greater Middle East.

4 See “Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe,” Stanford University, accessed September 14, 2020 <https://www.lockss.org> for more information.

showcases archival footage preserved by these efforts in order to demonstrate the richness of Afghan film and its history, offers a glimpse into why we should heed such a warning.

Political instability is a through line in the film. Nasr toys with the viewer a bit in presenting the arc of his documentary's story: in an early scene, the viewer is introduced to the staff of Afghan Film, talking in a narrow hallway about how they built a false wall to hide the entrance to the archive. They removed titles from film canisters and replaced them with numbered labels to hide their contents. As the camera follows the men down the hallway and outside into a courtyard, Nasr asks if they would let the Taliban burn these films. They recall the traumatic day of the raid – when many films were burned – and hold pieces of charred film up to the camera for emphasis. Olivier Alary's score heightens the effect. What we learn by the end, however, is that the films that were burned that day were not Afghan Film originals, but copies of Russian, Indian, and US movies distributed to the country and stored in plain view in the office space – decoys the staff had allowed to be burned to satisfy the raiders' destructive impulses. This trick of revelation did not add anything to my experience of the film, and in fact, detracted from it somewhat. The story is interesting without it; I felt somewhat resentful that Nasr had manipulated my emotions so plainly.

That said, Nasr's passion for Afghan film and his message about the importance of preserving it are clear. In the documentary, Nasr explains that he came to the project because his father lost all his family photographs in a house fire during the war in Afghanistan. Nasr, who grew up in Canada, collected images of Afghanistan in the absence of any visual representation of his father's past, feeling guilty for his privileged, conflict-free life. Collecting, watching, making, and distributing images: these were actions he undertook to preserve the legacy of a country's history on film – a history once locked away, and later saved, by those with a shared love of film. "You protect the things you love," Nasr says. He is right: love is as good an appraisal strategy as others I have heard.