

The “October Recommendation”: marking 25 years of a revolutionary doctrine

Ray Edmondson

It's unlikely that the date of 27 October 1980 is indelibly fixed in the minds of today's film archivists as a historical marker point in the history of the movement. But it should be. It's the day that the preservation of moving images acquired a universal recognition and legitimacy it had never previously enjoyed – a legitimacy we now take for granted.

On that day, at its General Conference in Belgrade, UNESCO adopted the *Recommendation for the Safeguarding and Preservation of Moving Images*. Its preamble read, in part:

Considering that moving images are an expression of the cultural identity of peoples...and form an integral part of a nation's cultural heritage; [that they] constitute new forms of expression, particularly characteristic of present day society, whereby an important and ever-increasing part of contemporary culture is manifested...

Recognising the results yielded by the efforts of specialized institutions to save moving images from the dangers to which they are exposed..

Considering that it is necessary for each State to take the appropriate complementary measures to ensure the safeguarding and preservation for posterity of this particularly fragile part of its cultural heritage...[and that] closer international cooperation should be promoted to safeguard and preserve these irreplaceable records of human activity and, in particular, for the benefit of those countries with limited resources

Considering that important aspects of the history and culture of certain countries, and, in particular, of those previously colonized, are recorded in the form of moving images which are not always accessible to the countries concerned.....

And the *Recommendation* then proceeded to set out the principles concerned, and the legal, administrative, technical and other practical measures which all member countries ought to take to safeguard their moving image heritage. It proclaimed the role of archives, promoted the concept of legal deposit, set out principles of selection, documentation and preservation, encouraged research and training, and dealt at length with issues of international cooperation.

Documents like the *Recommendation* don't just happen. Behind its drafting and presentation lay the advocacy and hard work, principally, of FIAF activists. To put the achievement in perspective, it should be remembered that in 1980 the concept of archival

training was still young (the first FIAF Summer School was held in 1973), that many film distributors and producers were still reluctant to allow their material into the custody of archives, that repatriation of material by countries to their former colonies was a truly revolutionary idea, and that in many - perhaps most - countries, the institutional film archive was an unknown concept. Significantly, as the preamble notes, motion pictures, although nearly a century old, were still perceived as a “new form of expression”.

How successful was the *Recommendation* in achieving the kind of action it advocated? In April 1984, four years after its adoption, UNESCO organized a Consultation of Experts on the Development of Audiovisual Archives in Vienna, which compiled a list of urgent measures needed over the next 10 years. In particular, the meeting called for a country-by-country survey to assess the impact of the *Recommendation*. FIAF and FIAT were commissioned to survey the situation of 542 film and television archives over 1985-86.

Immediately following the 1988 FIAF Congress in Paris, an international Roundtable was convened at UNESCO headquarters on 6 June to consider the results of the survey and issues arising. As the final report¹ notes, the participants “represented the whole spectrum of audiovisual archives enabling a comprehensive discussion of film, television and sound; an appreciation of climatic and social conditions in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe; an understanding of the problems connected with administration, finance, cataloguing, documentation, technical restoration, long-term storage, legal documents; an insight into the advantages of different archive structures – national and regional, governmental and non-governmental”. Raymonde Borde presided, with Wolfgang Klauke as rapporteur. Representatives of FIAF, FIAT, IASA, ICOM, ICA, IFLA, IFTC and CILECT participated.

The survey revealed a worrying global picture of film and television archiving: inadequate formal structures, storage and practices; shortage of skills and money; a widespread lack of support from governments. In relatively few cases, the *Recommendation* had had a discernible effect: it was judged to have been “highly successful in supporting the work of archives and has been particularly instrumental in the planning, creation or expansion of at least 20 archives. But for the most part, and sometimes in the industrialized countries, [it] was unknown and has therefore been an insufficient stimulus to action.”

The Roundtable adopted a series of recommendations, proposing (among other things):

- Increased publicity in various forms
- Action plans, drawn up in concert with archive federations, for regional workshops and measures to encourage political will to develop archives
- Development of model legal documents and statutes adaptable to particular country situations
- Technical workshops, and establishment of standards and facilities

¹ *Moving images: final report of the International Roundtable to evaluate the practical results of the UNESCO Recommendation for the safeguarding and preservation of moving images* UNESCO, Paris, 1989

- Establishment of training curricula and resources
- International cataloguing standards and data bases, including a global listing of all surviving nitrate film
- Feasibility study on creating an international development fund

To track the direct and indirect outworkings of these recommendations would take several articles. We see it, for example, in the emergence of the present postgraduate courses in audiovisual archiving that exist today in several countries; in the creation of what is now the CCAAA²; in the increase in workshops and training exercises around the world; in the work of the technical and cataloguing commissions of the various federations; in the proliferation of technical and curatorial literature to underpin the profession.³ But while much has happened since 1980, many of the hopes and needs remain unfulfilled.

It was with this in mind that the CCAAA, at its meeting in Toronto in June 2004, noted the impending 25th anniversary of the *Recommendation*. After a quarter of a century, much was different. There had been vast technological and structural change in the audiovisual archiving field, including the emergence of digital media, and a broad recognition that the sound as well as the image heritage needed protection. The legal environment had evolved dramatically, with copyright durations being extended in most countries and impinging on both archival access and the right to preserve. There were many more archives, but even large archives had become organizationally vulnerable and fundamental values were being challenged. Concepts such as ‘national production’ had changed their meaning.

In short, the needs of the field had grown beyond the provisions of the *Recommendation*. Ironically, because much of its terminology was linked to the physical concept of film, it was also beginning to have a self-limiting effect. Drafted in a pre-digital and largely pre-video era, it was – like all documents – a creature of its time. There was now a need for a new instrument based on the same principles but embracing these expanded realities.

The first step, to comply with UNESCO process, was the preparation of an “issues paper”. This took approximately ten months, as drafts and feedback went back and forth among CCAAA members. The final text was agreed in April 2005. As well as the issues above, it highlighted the need for definition and terminology that – as far as possible – avoided being format or time specific, to prevent the document becoming dated as formats and methods continue to evolve. As well, the instrument would need to define the characteristics of an audiovisual archive, picking up aspects of the unfulfilled 1988 Roundtable recommendation to offer model statutes adaptable to specific country situations. It would widen the concept of “standards” from the purely technical to the curatorial and ethical.

² Members of the CCAAA – the Coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archive Associations – are FIAF, FIAT, IASA, AMIA, SEAPAVAA, ICA, IFLA. Website is at www.ccaaa.org

³ Perhaps symbolically, UNESCO and CCAAA published the author’s monograph *Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Principles* in 2004 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the *Recommendation*.

At the time of writing, we await the next stage in the UNESCO process. An “issues paper” is *not* an instrument – the creation of what will hopefully become a new instrument for the *Safeguarding and Preservation of the Audiovisual Heritage* will be a lengthy process of drafting, consultation and redrafting for which the “issues paper” is just the starting point. And whether the instrument is a charter, a recommendation or a convention (the first two are advisory and the last is binding on those member countries which ratify it) its essential value will be one of moral, not legal, force: it will be an authoritative international reference point, but it will not, of itself, create the political will to impel governments and funding agencies to do the right thing. That, more prosaically, is what falls to us – the professionals, the advocates, the federations. The instrument simply becomes an indispensable part of our armory.