

Saving Cinema in Tunisia

Grantee: A.T.A.C – The Tunisian Cinema Association for Action
- represented by Wafa Ammari

Project: Mobile Cinema

Story collected by Zena Takieddine, March 4th, 2013



Tunisian cinema is one of the oldest in the Arab and North African region, going as far back as the turn of the 20th century! Does anyone remember that? The Lumieres Brothers in 1896? The Director Samama Chikly and his daughter Haydee Tamzali who acted the film 'Ayn Al-Ghazal' in 1924? Omar Khelifi and his first feature film 'Al-Fajr' in the 1966?

And yet Cinema in Tunis is in such a dismal state today. Cinema all around me has long been falling apart.

I grew up in a conservative society in a quiet town, far from the capital. Everything was routine, cultural platforms were practically non-existent. My favorite refuge from this monotony was film and television. These were the places where I could experience new and different worlds. I had no doubt that I wanted to study the arts when I grew up.

As soon as I got my baccalaureate degree, I enrolled in the university in our capital city believing that I would find it thriving with creativity, cultural production and genuine humanism. The reality of corruption and decay that I found, however, was truly shocking. There was no real creativity. Just bureaucrats filling in the hours and miss-appointed people filling in positions they were not suited for. It was a far cry from what I had hoped for. The university was failing me. The whole public system left much to be desired. I interrupted my studies many times, hungry to get internships and experience elsewhere. Where was my artistic haven? Where was the buzz of filmmakers, actors, directors, performers and audiences? I felt stifled and isolated. Could there really be no one else but me longing for the freedom and creativity of artistic production?

January 14 struck the country... a revolution! Finally, arts, movies, freedom and independent filmmaking could return! Or so I thought. The shocking turn towards more and more extremism has now left the cultural field even more repressed than it ever was before.

Amidst all this difficulty, I finally found a group of professionals who were thinking differently from the rest and were organizing themselves towards the values I believed in: a collective of cinema activists who had been fighting for freedom of expression during the years of dictatorship and even more-so today. I instantly knew I had to be part of their team, it was where I belonged. That is how I became part of 'L'Association Tunisienne d'Action pour le Cinema – A.T.A.C.

Cinema is for the people. This is the fundamental principle of A.T.A.C. We want to rebuild this connection between cinema and the people. We are dedicated to defending "al-sinama al-hurra" (free cinema) believing that it is a central to the freedom of human expression and social activism. We are aspiring for a Tunisian cinema that is free of censorship, a Cinema that can serve as a liberator of thoughts and imagination; a modern Cinema in all its forms.

A.T.A.C. also serves as a bridge that connects the different components of the cinematographic sector with each other. We also seek to strengthen relations between Tunisian cinema and world cinema. These are our two primary goals at A.T.A.C.: to strengthen the connection between citizens and cinema, and to contribute to the revival of the Tunisian filmmaking industry.

It is a long-term project with many partners involved. To organize our work and accomplish our goals, we've allocated four fields of action: promotional work to make cinema accessible to wider publics; archiving and creating a space for researching cinema; exploring the new audio-visual technologies relevant to filmmaking; macro management of coordinating all the different parts of what we do so that our organization is more effective in spreading awareness, information and the advancement of cinema.

With AFAC's help, many steps have already been made towards implementing our activities on the ground. A.T.A.C. held its first public meeting on November 1st, 2011, at the cultural center Ibn Rachiq, where we presented our vision and goals to the wider public. I'm happy to tell you that we had a larger turn out than we had expected, even attracting people with no previous film experience. It was great to see that so many people from the general public have views and hopes that are on track with ours. Their encouragement energized us to move further forward, from theory and strategy to concrete implementation.

One month later, on December 10th, we held a round table discussion about "Cinema in Tunisia: Conditions of Places and Prospects", which took place at Dar Bach Hambra. We invited experts to explain to the audiences the status of cinema in Tunisia today. The industry had undergone great disrepair over the past decades; with defunct venues, disaffected filmmakers, the absence of video editors and the rise of hacking and piracy. There are no cultural policies protecting filmmakers' rights.

Our most outreach oriented project, "Cinema on the Move", or "Mobile Cinema" as we like to call it, is where AFAC Express came in. For this project, we simply wanted to share the beauty of the cinematic experience with audiences who have no access to it. We targeted villages and communities living on the peripheries, those who have never had the opportunity to watch a film on a big screen. So, over the summer in 2012, we chose to visit five different villages and create our 'cinema caravan'.

Beyond the city centers, many Tunisians are disconnected from arts and culture productions. Frankly, we worried that movies may not appeal to the villagers. We were curious to see how they would relate to the experience? We selected films that were mostly fantasy, comedy and slapstick, silent black-and-white films, and off we went, hoping for the best.

We were surprised. In each of the villages, we were welcomed warmly and the films were received with open curiosity. Children came from far away, by bus and on foot, to see their first film ever, and they all returned the next day too!

While it was really heartwarming to see such a positive response, on a strategic level, it is also one of our goals to work on decentralizing access to cinema so that it really is for all the people. We need to make it accessible to wider segments of Tunisia's population.

Our fourth and most recent project, "Mon Cinéma à Moi" (Me and My Cinema), was more about citizen action. A.T.A.C. issued an open call inviting the people of Tunisia to photograph their favorite movie theatre. So few are the cinemas that are still in operation today. This meant raising public awareness on what was happening in terms of negligence and decay. So many of Tunisia's cinemas have been abandoned or transformed into retail stores, restaurants and otherwise.

The public was engaged, paying attention to the fate of cinema. We got many beautiful photographs and we launched a huge open-air exhibition on Habib Bourguiba Avenue to feature them as a large scale visual arts display. It made a big impact. It literally changed the face of the city. It was so impacting that we were invited to exhibit again during the Cinematographic Days of Carthage festival in November. This festival is one of the oldest in the region, and having public participation in this act of documentation was very powerful. The people can experience it first-hand and realize that they can be active actors in the defense of their cultural rights.

