

Tracks as a Living Archive: Safeguarding Cultural Heritage Through Cinema

¹Merin Varghese, ²Dr. N. Bhuvana

¹Research Scholar, ²Head and Associate professor of English,
Department of English,
Providence College for Women Coonoor, Nilgiris, India

merinv358@gmail.com, bhuvicoonoor@yahoo.com

Abstract— Digital platforms enable the preservation and dissemination of traditions, languages, and historical knowledge from previous generations, playing a crucial role in safeguarding cultural heritage for future generations. The digital era facilitates the sharing of information without requiring physical presence, thereby providing global access to diverse cultures and histories. Advanced technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and virtual reality enhance cultural experiences by making them more immersive and engaging. John Curran's *Tracks* (2013), based on Robyn Davidson's memoir, contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage. This paper examines the representation of indigenous Australian culture and investigates the role of digital media in preserving cultural traditions. The study is structured into three sections. The first section addresses indigenous culture along the journey, emphasizing the significance of oral traditions, beliefs, and the profound connection between indigenous communities and their land. The second section explores film as a digital archive of culture, wherein *Tracks* functions as a virtual repository that preserves cultural heritage through visual and auditory elements. The final section discusses the continuity of culture in the digital era, highlighting the importance of respecting and amplifying indigenous voices. It underscores the increasing necessity of utilizing digital platforms responsibly to safeguard heritage while fostering deeper cross-cultural understanding.

Index Terms—Cultural Heritage, Digital era, Indigenous representation

The digital era signifies rapid technological advancements. This period reflects an evolving system where information generation and dissemination occur at unprecedented rates, often beyond direct human regulation. The digital age marks a transition from an industrial economy, shaped by the Industrial Revolution, towards a knowledge-based economy fuelled by information technologies. Digital networks and global communication systems define modern education, cultural preservation, and cross-cultural engagements.

John Curran's film *Tracks* (2013) serves as a compelling exploration of digital media's role in cultural preservation. featuring Mia Wasikowska and Adam Driver, the film adapts Robyn Davidson's memoir, chronicling her nine-month journey across the Australian desert with camels. By transforming Davidson's experiences into a cinematic narrative, *Tracks* functions as a medium for documenting and safeguarding cultural heritage. The film premiered at the 2013 Toronto International Film festival under the special presentation category and competed in the 70th Venice International Film Festival. The Adelaide Film Festival selected *Tracks* as its opening film on October 10, 2013. The film was also screened at international film festivals, including those in London, Vancouver, Telluride, Dubai, Sydney OpenAir, Dublin and Glasgow.

The plot of *Tracks* follows Robyn Davidson's ambitious journey across the Australian desert, covering 2,700 kilometres to the Indian Ocean. Set in 1977, the narrative begins with Davidson's arrival in Alice Springs, where she prepares for the journey alongside her dog, Diggity, and four dromedary camels. Local farm work provides an opportunity to acquire camel-training skills in exchange for shelter and animals. A visit from friends introduces Davidson to National Geographic photographer Rick Smolan, whose recommendation leads her to seek financial sponsorship from the magazine. The sponsorship agreement secures funding for the journey but requires Smolan to document the trek through photography. Tensions arise as Davidson finds his presence intrusive, culminating in a confrontation during a scheduled photoshoot.

Davidson's encounters with Indigenous Australians highlight cultural and spiritual traditions as the journey progresses. Smolan's unauthorized photography of a private ceremony disrupts local traditions, further complicating Davidson's passage through sacred land, where unaccompanied women are prohibited. Intervention from indigenous men facilitates guidance from Mr. Eddy, a respectful elder whose companionship becomes integral to the journey. Tragedy unfolds when Diggity is poisoned, forcing Davidson to euthanize her companion. Media intrusion intensifies, prompting contemplation of abandoning the expedition. With Smolan's assistance in diverting reporters, Davidson ultimately completes the journey in solitude, marked only by the lens of Smolan's camera.

Understanding indigenous culture requires an exploration of its oral traditions, belief systems, and deep-rooted connection with the land. The term "indigenous" carries multiple meanings, commonly referring to the original inhabitants of a specific region before the arrival of migrants or colonizers. Over time, the word has become widely used to describe these communities. However, the terminology for indigenous groups varies across different countries and cultures. Terms such as tribes, First Peoples, First Nations, Aborigines, ethnic groups, *Adivasi* and *Janajati* are frequently used to refer to indigenous populations. Additionally, some

classifications are based on livelihoods and environments, including hunter-gatherers, nomads, peasants, and hill people. These terms are often used interchangeably with indigenous peoples.

Tracks examine the profound connection between indigenous Australians and the land. The desert holds sacred significance, illustrating spiritual beliefs and cultural traditions. Reverence for the land becomes evident when National Geographic photographer Rick Smolan disrupts a private ritual by taking unauthorized photographs. His actions offend the Indigenous group, resulting in their refusal to assist Robyn Davidson on her journey. Gender-based customs within the indigenous traditions further shape the narrative. Prohibitions against women traversing sacred land alone necessitate the guidance of an elder, Mr Eddy, who accompanies Davidson. Cultural practices dictate that women are not permitted to handle the flesh of hunted animals, as shown when Mr. Eddy hunts an animal and Davidson does not participate in processing its meat.

Coming from a different cultural background, Davidson never questions or disregards their traditions. Instead, she acknowledges and upholds indigenous beliefs. Her actions exemplify the importance of preserving and honouring indigenous heritage in an era defined by digital representation and cultural shifts. Respect for indigenous customs remains central to Davidson's journey.

The loss of ancient documents, oral traditions and diverse forms of recorded knowledge remains a significant threat to language, culture and society. Natural factors such as environmental exposure, as well as human negligence or lack of awareness, contribute to this decline. Paper deteriorates over time, metals corrode and materials like leather, parchment, and canvas degrade due to exposure to heat, light, and moisture. Consequently, invaluable records of past civilizations, including their languages, beliefs and societal structures, have already been lost, and with time, more may fade into obscurity. The combined effects of time, neglect, and extreme climatic conditions have led to the destruction of irreplaceable cultural artifacts. Taking immediate action to preserve historical and cultural heritage is crucial. While digital preservation extends the lifespan of such records, film functions as a digital archive by capturing and preserving cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives in a visually immersive and enduring format.

Robyn Davidson's memoir portrays both the physical and emotional trials of her journey: however, textual representation alone cannot fully capture the complexities of her psychological state. In contrast, *Tracks* employs visual and auditory elements to project Davidson's inner struggles, making them more accessible to the audience. Through the use of fragmented flashbacks and surreal dream imagery, the film effectively conveys the weight of her past traumas, particularly moments from her childhood of losing her mother to suicide and being sent to live with her aunt, emphasizing the profound sense of loss and displacement that influenced her desire for solitude. Similarly, after the devastating loss of her dog, Diggity, Davidson experiences a vision of the dog from her childhood walking away from her. This surreal moment reinforces the theme of abandonment, suggesting that Diggity's death reawakens the pain of earlier separations.

The film's cinematography captures the vastness of Australian desert, transforming it into both physical and symbolic space that embodies indigenous cultural beliefs. The film presents the desert through vast and sweeping visuals, emphasizing its dual role as both a solitary expanse and a revered space deeply embedded in Aboriginal spiritual traditions. The film further employs auditory elements to safeguard cultural heritage. The presence of Aboriginal elders, such as Mr. Eddy, allows for the incorporation of indigenous languages and oral traditions, ensuring their continuity within the digital medium. Sounds of the natural environment such as wind sweeping across the dunes, traditional Indigenous chants, and the distant calls of wildlife enhance the authenticity of the film's representation of Aboriginal culture. This visual and auditory representation reinforces the profound spiritual relationship indigenous Australians maintain with their land, preserving their cultural narratives in cinematic form. *Tracks* functions as an archival record that safeguards indigenous traditions from erosion over time.

The film subverts traditional portrayals of women in Australian outback literature and cinema, where they are often depicted as passive or disconnected from the landscape. Unlike *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), which presents young women as fragile and ultimately overtaken by their surroundings, *Tracks* highlights themes of endurance and independence. Through evocative visual composition and immersive soundscapes, the film transforms the desert into a space where a woman can navigate and flourish rather than be marginalised. This reimagining of the outback contributes to cultural preservation by offering a fresh female perspective, one that recognizes female resilience in a genre historically centred on male experiences.

Tracks highlights the contrast between mass tourism's shallow engagement with the land and Davidson's deeply immersive and respectful journey. By illustrating the distinction between exploitative tourism and genuine cultural interaction, *Tracks* preserves and amplifies indigenous perspectives on the land while critiquing contemporary disruptions to sacred spaces. Utilizing rich visual and auditory elements such as the tourist's blaring vehicles, intrusive photography, and Eddie's humorous yet pointed response reinforces this critique. Davidson's journey, shaped by her willingness to learn from indigenous communities, offers an alternative way of engaging with the outback, emphasizing cultural respect and deeper understanding over mere spectacle. This thoughtful depiction helps preserve indigenous cultural narratives while questioning mainstream portrayals of the Australian landscape. Ultimately, the film demonstrates the role of cinema as a digital archive, ensuring the preservation of cultural heritage for future generations.

Archiving remains one of the most vital strategies for safeguarding history and heritage. "Film archives are storehouses of treasures in terms of preserving cultural heritage for posterity" (Lauren 398). Many film archives contain analogue films that span over a century. As Suzanna states, "When archives disappear, a period of culture and history is lost as well as a certain age" (1). As a globally recognized art form, film holds immense cultural significance, necessitating its preservation. By reinforcing the significance of indigenous heritage in contemporary society and blending ancestral knowledge with modern cinematic expression, *Tracks* and similar films contribute to the preservation of cultural identity.

Disparities in justice persist in contemporary society, making it essential to authentically represent indigenous perspectives in digital media. Fostering cultural preservation and promoting equity ensures that these narratives are conveyed accurately and respectfully. Film serves as a powerful tool for amplifying indigenous voices and addressing systemic marginalization. Genuine portrayal on digital platforms provides a space for indigenous communities to share their histories and traditions on their own terms.

Gayatri Spivak, in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), critiques the way in which dominant intellectuals often speak on behalf of marginalized groups rather than creating spaces for them to articulate their own narratives. This issue is particularly relevant in media and storytelling, where filmmakers and digital creators must recognize their ethical responsibility to ensure that indigenous perspectives are represented with agency and authenticity. Instead of imposing external interpretations, creators must prioritize indigenous voices, allowing them to express their own experiences and histories. By upholding these principles, writers and filmmakers can contribute to a more equitable cultural archive, one that does not define indigenous communities from an outsider’s perspective but instead amplifies their own voices. This approach reflects Spivak’s call to shift from speaking for the subaltern to enabling them to speak for themselves.

The concept of digital storytelling emerged from the Centre for Digital storytelling in California, with Joe Lambert, a co-director, playing a key role in its development. Storytelling has long served as an informal yet vital means of education, facilitating the transmission of knowledge across generations. However, in recent years, significant transformations have occurred in how stories are created, the media used for dissemination, and the audiences they reach. Films like *Tracks* exemplify how digital storytelling preserves cultural heritage by capturing spoken histories, ancestral knowledge, and personal journeys through an integration of visual and auditory components. More broadly, film making functions as a modern extension of traditional storytelling, ensuring that diverse viewpoints, historical experiences, and cultural expressions are archived and conveyed across generations.

The role of cinema in preserving cultural narratives is more critical than ever in an era where digital media shapes historical consciousness. Cinema, as both an archival and artistic medium, has the power to document traditions, challenge dominant narratives and amplify marginalised voices that have historically been silenced. The preservation of these narratives depends on a responsible approach in which filmmakers and digital creators uphold cultural integrity by ensuring accuracy, securing proper consent, and fostering meaningful partnerships with the communities they depict. By embracing digital storytelling as a dynamic space for cultural continuity, society can foster an inclusive historical record, one that through cross-culturalisation, enables people to understand each other’s histories, traditions, and perspectives, promoting mutual respect and deeper global connections, while resisting erasure in an increasingly globalized world.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ayoola, Kudirat Ajoke. “Film Preservation in the Digital Era: Pitfalls and Potentials”. *Research Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, vol.8, no.1,2022, pp.52-53.
- [2] Blackwood, Gemma. “Tracks, a Film That Lets a Woman Thrive in the Outback.” *The Conversation*,7 March.2014, theconversation.com/tracks-a-film-that-lets-a-woman-thrive-in-the-outback-24026.
- . Cultural Globalization and Indigenous Communities a Case Study of the Buryat Mongols of Russia 1991 2015. 2023, hdl.handle.net/10603/581725.
- [3] Conrad, Suzanna. "Analog, the Sequel: An Analysis of Current Film Archiving Practice and Hesitance to Embrace Digital Preservation." *Archival Issues*, vol.34, no.1,2012.
- [4] Davidson, Robyn. *Tracks: A Woman’s Solo Trek Across 1700 Miles of Australian Outback*. Vintage,1995.
- [5] Jansen, I. E. E. “Finding one’s own voice as an indigenous filmmaker”. 7 Oct.2015, <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/36117>.
- [6] Lauren, Tilton, "Preservation First? Re-Viewing Film Digitization," *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals*, vol.12, no. 4, 2016.
- [7] Nithiyandham,K. *Role of Women Library Professionals in the Digital Era in Chennai a Study*. 29 Apr. 2016, hdl.handle.net/10603/86592.
- [8] Ramasesh, C. P. *Digitization and Digital Preservation of the Heritage Collection in Select Libraries in India and Iran: A Comparative Study*. 1 July 2011, hdl.handle.net/10603/17836.
- [9] Rantbit. “Tracks (2013).” *RantBit*, 10 May 2014, rantbit.wordpress.com/2014/05/10/tracks-2013.
- [10] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988. Reflections on the History of an Idea. Columbia UP, 2010.
- [11] Syal, Pushpinder. *An Exploration of Digital Storytelling as a Learning Activity in Teaching of English as a Second Language in Higher Education*. 2017, hdl.handle.net/10603/226536.