

FIAF – the international archive industry’s first professional body

Leo Enticknap gives us his personal view on the origins of the organisation and an extraordinary quartet of talents

A temperamental, Gallic ideologue; a pin-striped English civil servant, who by his own admission “was not, by temperament, a collector”; one of the earliest female film critics, who championed the 1920s avant garde before emigrating to the US and founding America’s first major moving image archive; and a Nazi party functionary and future SS officer. An unusual combination of talents, to put it mildly: but these four individuals – Henri Langlois, Ernest Lindgren, Iris Barry and Frank Hensel – established an organisation that now regards itself as (to quote its website) “the most important network of the leading specialised archive institutions around the world”.

The International Federation of Film Archives (usually referred to by the acronym formed by the initials of its name in French, FIAF) was established in 1938 to promote and defend the preservation of moving images alongside that of other forms of archival public record.

For 39 years FIAF was the only international professional body in existence to represent moving image preservation. FIAT was founded in 1977, FOCAL International in 1985, AMIA in 1990 and SEPAVAA in 1996. The basic principles established by its founders remain largely unchanged to the present day. FIAF’s membership criteria demand that affiliated archives “must not make any commercial use” of their holdings. A Code of Ethics requires that long-term preservation must take priority over all other considerations and that access should ideally be curated and scholarly.

In contrast to the more recently established professional bodies such as FOCAL International and AMIA, individual archivists are not allowed to

join. FIAF’s officers are drawn from the staff of its affiliate organisations. These can only be not-for-profit archive institutions that can demonstrate, through a rigorous inspection process, their technical competence in preservation and their commitment to FIAF’s underpinning ethical principles.

On the face of it this dogmatic approach seems at odds with the profession as it exists today. Much of the job is done by freelance consultants and researchers, collaboration between public and private sector collections is commonplace and the boundaries



Leo Enticknap

archive would want to use any of its films against the commercial interests of the owners of the rights, because this would endanger its existence at its own national level.” The hard line embodied in FIAF’s rules and Code of Ethics was intended to further enshrine its affiliates’ reputation as honest brokers.

But the driving force behind FIAF’s unique ethos was the individuals who founded it. Barry was the intellectual of the group, cutting her teeth as the *Daily Mail*’s film critic in the late 1920s before emigrating to New York, where she established the Film Department at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). There she focused on building up a circulating collection of prints which she regarded as classics, inspired largely by her own writing and criticism.

As a consequence, many the building blocks of academic film studies as taught in universities all over the world (e.g. debates around canonisation, genre and authorship) have their origins in her work in the 1930s. Hensel is an enigmatic figure, about whom relatively little is known. A photographer and Nazi party activist since the mid-1920s, he was given the job of establishing the German Reichsfilmarchiv by Goebbels in 1935, the idea being to create a permanent record of the rise of what was believed would become the Thousand Year Reich.

Discussing the likely consequences of a world war, in correspondence with MoMA in May 1939, Hensel stressed his belief that film preservation must continue, regardless of and unaffected by hostilities and political factors. There is also evidence to suggest that he may have secretly helped Langlois to rescue and preserve a number of films (including *The Great Dictator*) that the Nazi authorities wanted destroyed. For this reason Hensel is often seen as a problematic figure.

On the one hand, there is no doubt that he was ideologically empathetic with Nazism before and throughout



Iris Barry

between non-profit and for-profit activity in the field are becoming increasingly hazy. The nature of the intellectual property represented by the public sector archives’ holdings – most of it owned by others and not covered by any legal deposit provisions – takes care of that.

Rigidly non-commercial

Yet ironically it is exactly the same issue which led to FIAF’s rigidly non-commercial stance. Writing in 1971, Lindgren observed that “no genuine

the period of the Third Reich, yet on the other he did not allow these beliefs to undermine his commitment to film preservation. Furthermore, as a colleague recently pointed out, any detailed consideration of Hensel's role inevitably raises the intensely controversial question of how and to what extent Langlois, who is regarded as a cultural icon second only to De Gaulle in recent French history, collaborated with a relatively senior Nazi official.

Hensel vanished

Hence, possibly, the reason why historians of moving image archiving tend to have shied away from the issue. Hensel was briefly taken prisoner-of-war at the end of the Second World War, before effectively disappearing without trace. According to some accounts he spent the last two decades of his life working in a circus and running a sauna.

But it was Lindgren and Langlois – or more specifically, the deep-seated

projection of preservation masters risked permanent loss or damage to their content and that without the resources needed to preserve everything, the BFI had to be clear what did and did not fall within its remit. In the event, the Selection Committee ended up being one of the most controversial aspects of Lindgren's legacy, accused by its critics of applying subjective and elitist criteria.

Langlois was the temperamental opposite of Lindgren in almost every way. His working methods were ad hoc rather than methodical, and he believed that there was no point in preserving any form of heritage without giving it constant public exposure. Lindgren's vision for the National Film Archive was essentially that of a time capsule, focused almost exclusively on high quality preservation for future generations. The Cinémathèque Française under Langlois was primarily a museum and a cinema, with the film collection being to support its educational mission.



Henri Langlois

and acrimonious differences between them – that defined what ultimately became today's FIAF. Lindgren was the organisations and systems man. With the preservationist Harold Brown*, he founded what is now (umpteenth changes of name and rebrandings later) the BFI National Archive. He built the organisation up on principles which are now enshrined in the FIAF Code of Ethics – no use of master or unique elements for access purposes, no commercial exploitation of the archive's holdings, rigid observance of copyright and clear and consistent criteria for selection.

Lindgren's reasoning was that he had to gain the film industry's trust, or culturally valuable films would not be offered for acquisition, that the



Ernest Lindgren

Stolen prints!

Langlois would collect anything and everything, in the belief that what might be regarded as culturally insignificant now may be recognised as a masterpiece later. And he wasn't bothered about where he collected from, either – a significant proportion of the prints acquired in the '30s and '40s are believed effectively to have been stolen.

The image archivists tend to have of Langlois today is that of a visionary curator and educator, but a lousy preservationist (he once opined that the best treatment for decomposing nitrate was to hang it out to dry on a washing line), who presided over the catastrophic

1959 fire at the Cinémathèque, in which a significant proportion of the then surviving French silent cinema was irrevocably lost. Lindgren, on the other hand, is characterised as the inflexible, Blimpish civil servant with little passion for the material in his care and who inspired the apocryphal 'National Film Archive hymn': chorus – "We have it, yes, of course we do; But sorry, no, you cannot view!"

Remember that both Lindgren and Langlois spent their careers developing an entirely new profession, one that was regarded with suspicion by the film industry and of little cultural importance by a large swathe of the political establishment. Their extreme approaches are very much the product of that, and can be seen at work (along with, to a lesser extent, those of Barry and Hensel) in the rules and Code of Ethics of the modern FIAF. The world has moved on since the uniquely volatile political and cultural climate into which FIAF was born. Technologies of preservation and access are available which none of FIAF's founders envisaged, and which lessen the significance of some of Lindgren's concerns.

Studios and media organisations realise the need to protect the intellectual property value of their back catalogues, and regularly collaborate with their taxpayer-funded counterparts to achieve this. And the political landscape is a very different one, too, in which access to collections is now the driving force behind what little public funding moving images are able to consume.

Yet the principles which FIAF's four founders sought to enshrine remain relevant. Audio-visual media are still probably the most difficult and expensive of all archival documents to preserve reliably. Many remain unconvinced of their cultural significance, and intellectual property law continues to impede scholarly and other forms of non-commercial access. As FIAF's recent Declaration of Principles on Copyright demonstrates, these are issues the organisation is trying to address. Its challenge is to uphold its founding principles in a way that is relevant for today's archives, archivists, their depositors and the users of their collections.

* See Harold Brown obituary on page 34

Dr Leo Enticknap, University of Leeds
tel. +44 (0)113 343 5853
email: LEnticknap@leeds.ac.uk