

Review Article

Film Archives at the Centenary of Film

by SAM KULA

RAYMOND BORDE. *Les Cinémathèques*. Paris, 1984. 257 p. RICHARD ROUND. *A Passion for Film: Henri Langlois and the Cinémathèque Française*. New York, 1983. 218 p. GLENN MYRENT and GEORGES P. LANGLOIS. *Henri Langlois: First Citizen of Cinema*. [French edition: *Henri Langlois, premier citoyen du cinéma*] New York, 1995. 357 p. ANTHONY SLIDE. *Nitrate Won't Wait: A History of Film Preservation in the United States*. Jefferson, North Carolina, 1992. 228 p. PENELOPE HOUSTON. *Keepers of the Frame: The Film Archives*. London, 1994. 179 p.

The first documented public presentation of moving images to a paying audience took place in Paris in December 1895, and that event, based on the Lumière cinématographe, is generally accepted as the official debut of *the movies*. Although the series of technological innovations that resulted in an apparatus that could capture a series of images and then play them back so as to create the illusion of movement actually took place over decades in the last half of the nineteenth century, 1995 marked the centenary of the invention of cinematography and of *the cinema*.¹

The first documented assessment of the cultural and social value of film, of the recorded images, and of the need to preserve the record appeared only three years after film's birth date. Boleslaw Matuszewski, a Polish cinematographer working in Paris, published *Une nouvelle source de l'histoire* in 1898. In this pamphlet, Matuszewski called for the creation of national film archives that would identify, collect, describe, and preserve this new source of historical documentation. Legislation and appropriate government action would give this "new source the same authority, the same official existence and the same possibilities as the other recognized archives." Matuszewski was remarkably prescient, proposing legal deposit and technical standards (the deposit of negatives, the use of reference prints for access), but he was not naïve: "I have no illusions that my project will be rapidly implemented."²

He was right about that as well. There was no reaction to his proposal. Cinematography was over thirty years old, by any reckoning of the birth date, before the first film archives were established. That they emerged in the early thirties, in

Sweden, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States, has been linked to the watershed in film history caused by the coming of sound. Suddenly, all silent films were technologically obsolete and in grave danger of loss through neglect or deliberate destruction as they no longer had any commercial value.

Fortunately there was enough critical and theoretical writing on film to establish the cultural significance of silent fiction film as a distinct art form worthy of preservation. At the same time, the addition of sound enhanced the documentary value of film in the recording and representation of reality. By 1938 the archives in New York, Paris, London, and Berlin were confident enough in the national film archives movement to establish the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF).³ It was to take another forty years before the world's film archives would gain the confidence of the industry--the producers and distributors who controlled the rights to the films acquired by the archives, sometimes without the full cooperation and/or knowledge of the industry--and could establish effective partnerships in the restoration of early films and the safeguarding of current productions.

It seems fitting to mark the centenary of film with a review of all the publications that have come to my notice that specifically relate to the history of film archives and the careers of film archivists.⁴ There are not very many, and two of them are biographies of Henri Langlois, one of the most remarkable and controversial figures ever to grace any profession, let alone the putative one of film archivist.

I should declare my bias, which is substantial, at the outset. I began as a film archivist in 1958 at the National Film Archives in London, working for Ernest Lindgren, one of the pioneers who started a film library for the British Film Institute in 1934.⁵ By 1958 Lindgren and a group of members who opposed Langlois's leadership as Secretary General of FIAF were locked in combat for control of the organization. My first introduction to the great man was as Lindgren's deputy and there was very little warmth in the greeting!

My next serious encounters with Langlois were when I was director of the American Film Institute's archives programme in Washington in the late sixties. I hired an assistant, a reformed private collector (who else would have the contacts?), who some time previously had traded several films with Langlois in deals which were somewhat dubious as to propriety if not legality (not at all unusual in the film archives world of the fifties!). Langlois was furious that I would now be aware of his "secrets." We maintained a professional relationship over the years, but we never achieved a satisfactory level of mutual trust. Friendship was out of the question. That the enmity was lasting on his side was proven by an extraordinary letter he addressed to Wilfred Smith, then Dominion Archivist, arguing that my employment, in 1973, as director of the newly-established film archives programme at the Public Archives of Canada, was a serious mistake as my connections in the film world included known "pirates"! My appointment may have been a mistake, but consorting with pirates was not a contribution factor.

During my tenure at the American Film Institute, Anthony Slide, the author of *Nitrate Won't Wait*, worked in the programme on contract. He was a keen cineaste, but an indifferent employee, and my recollection is that he left somewhat embittered that the Institute had not adequately recognized and rewarded his talents. I tend,

therefore, to take a jaundiced view of his negative assessment of the Institute's contribution to the film and television preservation movement in the United States.

Even taken collectively, the five books under review only offer a spotty account of the evolution, activities, and cultural role of cinémathèques or film archives.⁶ The biographies are obviously centred on the life and work of Henri Langlois, but as the man was so closely identified with the institution he created, the Cinémathèque française, they both provide a history of the Cinémathèque from its establishment in 1936 to Langlois's death in January 1977. Langlois's central role in the work of FIAF during the first quarter century of its existence and his influence on the development of film archives in Europe and Latin America also lead his biographers to provide some account of the growth of the international movement to protect the film heritage.

In fact, Henri Langlois looms large in all these books, with the exception of Anthony Slide's disappointing account of film preservation in the United States. Penelope Houston sets Langlois off against Ernest Lindgren as the *ying and yang* of archives policy, the two conflicting impulses that motivate all film archivists: to provide public access through consultation and exhibition; and to protect and preserve the films in the collection.

Raymond Borde sets out to provide a more general history of film archives, but as a French archivist whose Cinémathèque de Toulouse lived in the shadow of the Cinémathèque française, it is not surprising that he ends up devoting half his text to *l'affaire Langlois*. The problem is that the rest of the world receives only cursory treatment. Borde at least tries to place the birth of the film archives movement in the mid-thirties in a historical context. Langlois's biographers imply that Langlois was a lone voice in the wilderness who single-handedly developed the concept of the film archives.

It does not, after all, diminish Langlois's achievements to note that the Cinémathèque française was established amidst what could be described as a flurry of manifestos, propositions, and even government actions on the urgent need to protect the film heritage in Europe. In fact, as Borde describes the scene, critics like Léon Moussinac and Lucienne Escoubé had published complete mission statements for a cinémathèque as early as 1929. In 1933 the Direction générale des beaux-arts created a body called La cinémathèque nationale. Unfortunately they selected Mme. Laure Albin-Guillot as director, a woman with impeccable social connections and absolutely no knowledge of film, who was, in Borde's words, "simply inert."⁷

Langlois could have found inspiration in several countries. In Stockholm the prolific and powerful critic Bengt Idestam-Almquist called for a film archives as a parallel project to the Swedish Academy of Cinema that he organized in 1933. "Robin Hood," his nom-de-plume, was not to be denied, and the Filmhistoriska Samlingarna in Stockholm became the first film archives in the world when it opened its doors on 31 October 1933.

The Swedes were just several months ahead of the Germans. Josef Goebbels was a film enthusiast and exercised his new authority as Hitler's Minister of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda to issue a decree on 18 December 1933, forbidding the destruction or export of *any* negative of *any* film of *any* type without the authority

of the Reichsfilmkammer, the body set up to regulate the film industry. On 14 July 1934, another decree established the Reichsfilmarchiv, which opened its doors with the negatives of 1,200 films, of which 350 were feature films, already in the vaults--one of the obvious advantages of implementing an archives policy in a dictatorship.

In 1935 Goebbels hosted representatives from sixty-seven institutions around the world at the International Congress of Film. Not all the representatives came from film archives by any means, although Langlois and Lindgren and many other future film archivists attended. The Congress is notable for passing a resolution calling on all nations to establish film archives to protect national production through the deposit of negatives. The language is strikingly similar to that used in the *UNESCO Recommendation for the Safeguarding and Preservation of Moving Images* adopted on 27 October 1980.

The losses to the film heritage had already been very severe when the first archives began their work. The worst loss, in terms of the extent of the *deliberate* destruction involved, occurred between 1927 and 1931. Literally tons of silent prints were melted down for their silver content, or just plowed into the ground as industrial waste. One technology had effectively killed another, a side-effect of progress in the age of industrial capitalism. That the product of the obsolete technology was part of the national culture was irrelevant. In Borde's justifiably outraged words, it represented a "pitiless destruction of the human heritage that can only be compared to the burning of the Library at Alexandria."⁸

The losses were not as severe at the end of the nitrate era in the early fifties because there were already many archives prepared to protect nitrate--the Cinémathèque française, for example, became the only legal authority in France that was allowed to hold nitrate prints, and the National Film and Television Archives in London acquired tons of nitrate when the government first ordered it out of the greater London area at the start of World War II and then banned the commercial storage and shipment of nitrate in the mid-fifties.⁹

It was not until 1936 that Langlois and George Franju joined Jean Mitry and turned their film club, *Cercle du cinéma*, into the Cinémathèque française. Mitry, an indefatigable film historian, was actually the first *archiviste* of the Cinémathèque, but Langlois quickly became the driving force. It is impossible to exaggerate Langlois's obsession with film and film culture in all its aspects. When the Germans marched into Paris in 1940 Langlois had some three hundred films in his possession. By 1945, despite a campaign by the Germans to find and destroy all films tainted by association with Jews and other prohibited persons, he had over three thousand. Some, it is rumoured, were stored in his mother's bathroom, and others under his bed.

How this was accomplished by a twenty-six year old (who had deserted from the army and walked back to Paris after the fall of France in 1940) without funds or official connections has given rise to suspicions, and allegations, that Langlois was collaborating with the Germans. Both biographers deny the allegations, but they offer little solid evidence to refute them, and the questions Borde raises remain unanswered.

Borde, for example, takes the position that it was odd that Langlois should have secured a home for the Cinémathèque française, its first real home, in the same

building, 7, avenue de Messine, which housed the office of the German film censors, the Reichsfilmkammer, in Paris. Odder still, he maintains, is that Frank Hensel, the man selected by Goebbels to head the Reichsfilmarchiv, the same man nominated by Langlois to be the first President of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) when that body was established in 1938, and now, as Major Hensel, the director of the Reichsfilmkammer, was such a dedicated cineaste that he was prepared to defy the orders of Goebbels, his patron, in order to assist Langlois in saving the very films his own office had condemned and ordered destroyed. Hensel went much further than turning a blind eye, apparently, and secured for Langlois storage space in the Palais de Chaillot to which only Langlois had access.

No one knows what Hensel's real motives were. He has not recorded his memories of those years, Langlois has always been elusive on the details, and neither biography sheds any light on the real relationship between the two men. It is, nevertheless, an extraordinary story, much embroidered by self-serving anecdotes from Langlois and his supporters over the years. The facts are, however, that the Cinémathèque française had a much richer collection in 1945 than in 1939, and when FIAF was reorganized in 1948 the headquarters were located in the Cinémathèque, still at 7, avenue de Messine. At that first postwar FIAF Congress, Langlois was elected Secretary-General and remained in the post until he left the organization in 1960.

There is no doubt that the collections of the Cinémathèque française grew at an astounding rate in the twenty years following the end of the war, as did those of the other archives in Europe and North and South America (film archives development in Asia was sporadic and slow, and in Africa practically non-existent). The size of the collection at any time could only be estimated. Langlois would claim sixty thousand titles by the mid-seventies. Other estimates cut that total in half. The only comprehensive record, apparently, was a set of orange notebooks that Langlois carried with him wherever he travelled.

The real issue is what happened to the films once they entered the collection. Borde rightly maintains that a film archives needs a director who is both artisan and artist: "a grand cinémathèque is born when the two personalities--the craftsman and the showman--merge."¹⁰ Borde concludes, and the record tends to confirm his assessment, that Langlois was a superb showman, and a hopeless archives manager.¹¹

Some insight into Langlois's basic approach to archives management is provided by two exchanges between Langlois and Lindgren that Borde pulled from the minutes of FIAF conferences. At the first postwar conference in 1948 Lindgren declared, "Our first task is to preserve film." "No," replied Langlois, "our principle task is to promote film culture."¹² In 1953 Lindgren proposed a union catalogue of members' holdings. Langlois dismissed the idea, saying "We have before us centuries in which to make catalogue cards."¹³ Borde's observations on that attitude are worth quoting in the original: "... les dirigeants de cinémathèques ont les gestionnaires d'un patrimoine collectif, ils ne sont pas les suzerains d'un domaine enchanté où dormirait le Graal ... un catalogue dans un cerveau, c'est une bouteille à la mer."¹⁴

As a French archivist struggling to acquire the films he was hoping to conserve (primarily the documentary films that he claimed Langlois ignored in favour of fiction films and the French features of the forties and fifties that had been condemned as *bourgeois* by the critics-turned-filmmakers who made up *la nouvelle vague* of French

production in the fifties and sixties), Borde is most bitter about Langlois's opposition to the imposition of legal deposit in France. A decree passed 21 June 1943 had extended to film producers the same requirements imposed on book publishers, but it was not implemented until 1977, the year Langlois died. Langlois opposed legal deposit, according to Borde, because it diminished the significance of private collections, and because his friends in the Motion Picture Export Association, the international arm of the Motion Picture Association of America, were opposed to any legal restraints on the control of their productions. They were prepared to deposit films in the Cinémathèque, and in certain other archives with which they had agreements in place, *on loan*, but they insisted that the deposits be voluntary and not mandatory.

Borde is equally scathing on the subject of Langlois's refusal to use the climate-controlled vaults of the Centre nationale de cinématographique at Bois d'Arcy, which were set up in 1958. Borde sees Langlois's refusal to take advantage of what were demonstrably superior storage facilities as the result of his paranoia and his irrational fear that he might lose control over "his" treasures.¹⁵

Although Langlois pleaded poverty throughout his career, the facts according to Borde reveal that from 1945 the Cinémathèque française was receiving a large enough subvention to allow it to protect adequately the films it had acquired.¹⁶ The subvention, however, was never large enough to allow Langlois to programme two theatres exhibiting roughly a thousand films per year, organize special presentations at Cannes, Venice, and a half dozen other festivals, mount exhibitions of posters, set designs, and other documentation associated with the cinema in Paris and elsewhere in Europe, and continue to acquire, by purchase if necessary, the artifacts he wanted for the museum of the cinema he had been planning in his mind ever since he began his extraordinary career, *and* protect the films in the collection. Something had to give, and it was usually the film copying programme.

Langlois stored roughly half (estimates, as always, vary) of his collection in very sub-standard vaults at Bois d'Arcy, vaults he could control, with the result that a survey of the films in those vaults after his death revealed that three-fifths of the films had either deteriorated or were in urgent need of copying. In addition, Langlois was widely believed to have stored many of his treasures at secret locations. Estimates at the high end suggest there may have been as many as two hundred secret locations!

That the collection was huge at one time is attested by two facts. When the Cinémathèque française collection was finally transferred officially to the Service des archives of the Centre nationale de cinématographique, sometime in the eighties, staff counted some ninety thousand cans, probably in excess of fifteen thousand titles. The other fact (a sad one) comes from the inquiry into the fire at Le Pontel on 3 August 1980.¹⁷ Estimates place the loss to the Cinémathèque at between forty thousand and sixty thousand cans, in the region of seven thousand titles.

Neither of the Langlois biographies are perceptive or honest enough to point out that film acquisition, especially nitrate film, without a preservation copying programme is a fool's game, and a great disservice to the nation. Langlois worked all his life to collect his treasures and almost half the collection went up in smoke in fifteen minutes.

All his life Langlois was a follower of the occult in that he believed in prophecy and the guidance of devices like Tarot cards. Having worked himself into total exhaustion, a chronic condition in his later years, and having abused his body with a ruinous diet and self-prescribed nostrums, he is supposed to have accepted his own death in 1977 because prophecy foretold of a great disaster coming in 1980. For Langlois, the fire at Le Pontel would have qualified as the great disaster.

Borde tends to minimize the enormous contribution Langlois made in developing the film archives in other countries, even if he himself was not actually protecting the French film heritage. Most of the new cinémathèques started as cine clubs and they were dependent on the more established film archives for access to the classics of the cinema. Langlois was willing to share the riches of the Cinémathèque française and he became the patron saint of new archives around the world. Whether in Milan, Lausanne, Rio de Janeiro, Montréal, or Brussels, the films from the Cinémathèque helped immeasurably in establishing the cultural legitimacy of film archives and their claims for government support.

As Secretary-General of FIAF in those formative years, Langlois was also a key figure in defining the rights of film archives in relation to the rights of producers and distributors. He was willing to concede that the producers or their assignees *owned* the films but maintained that archives had a *moral* right to copy the films when it was necessary in order to protect them, and to show them under *non-commercial* conditions. Unfortunately no two archives defined *non-commercial* in the same way.

One of the issues that led to Langlois's break with FIAF in 1960 was the loan of archive prints to cine clubs. Langlois agreed with the producers that this was in effect non-theatrical distribution and argued that some of the FIAF members were knowingly violating the rights of copyright owners by doing this. The issue could have been resolved, but many of the members had grown weary of Langlois's dictatorial management of the Federation. He stormed out at one session, expecting to be recalled, and when that did not happen he broke with FIAF forever. The Federation had to bring a legal action to regain control of its records housed in the Cinémathèque française.

Langlois was impossible, but he was also impossible to ignore, and his influence on the next generation of film archivists was immense. He was, after all, the only film archivist to be awarded an honorary Oscar by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. This was in 1976, and the citation reads "for his devotion to the art of film, his massive contributions in preserving its past, and his unswerving faith in its future." Even Jacques Ledoux, who succeeded Langlois as Secretary-General of FIAF and had many bitter quarrels with him over the years, had to admit "We are all the children of Langlois."¹⁹ But he would also occasionally add "Even if we have rejected our father."²⁰

Langlois was a gifted publicist and flamboyant showman. He was, in Penelope Houston's profile, "the man who gave currency to the word *cinémathèque*, not just in France but throughout the world, who made the profession of film archivist fashionable - not of course by preserving films but by showing them. He created a legend, gloried in it and before the end had become its prisoner."²¹

Neither of the two Langlois biographies comes to grips with the complex psychology of the man. That he was obsessed is clear, but what drove his obsession and the

accompanying paranoia (even his friends concede he lived in an atmosphere of continual and interlocking conspiracies) is left shrouded in mystery. As a man who cherished his secrets, Langlois would probably have approved.

Richard Roud was for many years a film programmer at the National Film Theatre in London and Director of the London Film Festival. An American by birth and a dedicated Francophile by education and inclination, Roud greatly admired Langlois's exuberant lifestyle, his encyclopedic knowledge of cinema, and his "passion for films." He had also been dependant on the relationship with Langlois for a supply of prints to sustain his programming. In any contest between Langlois, the exhibitor, and Lindgren, the conservator, Roud naturally sided with Langlois, even though Lindgren and he were both employed by the British Film Institute.

In his introduction Roud maintains that the book is "not the work of a hagiographer," but he admits that he started out in the belief that Langlois was "a great man," and nothing he learned in writing the book has altered that belief.²² One can accept that and judge the book accordingly, but Roud's vilification of all those who opposed Langlois in France and in FIAF is neither fair nor balanced. In his efforts to protect the great man's reputation he resorts to some twisted logic and does the reader a disservice in presenting Langlois's unique perspective on archives management as acceptable practise.

Roud is aware, for example, of the critical *archival* issues that placed Lindgren and Langlois in opposing camps. Lindgren, and most of the members of FIAF, argued that original prints of films, especially those on unstable and flammable nitrate stock, must be protected if they are to survive, and if funds will not permit the *preservation* of such films (by the manufacture of duplicate negatives and reference prints on safety stock) protection must take precedence over access. Langlois, on the other hand, believed all prints, *especially* nitrate prints, should be projected. "They need to breathe!" he said, "...films are like Persian rugs: you keep them at their best by using them."²³

Roud knows this is nonsense,²⁴ but rather than point this out he defends the practise as necessary for the legendary role that Langlois played in educating a whole generation of French filmmakers, *la nouvelle vague*, by running classic European and especially American films for them over and over. These *enfants de cinémathèque* (François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Goddard, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol, etc.) were all grateful for their education, and intensely loyal to Langlois as a result, but they were probably not aware that the Cinémathèque, in projecting the single prints that it held, was gradually and inevitably destroying them. If a print was the best surviving material on a particular title, they were depriving future generations of cineastes of that piece of their heritage.

Roud's kneejerk defence of Langlois's actions under any circumstances becomes positively offensive--at least to a film archivist--when dealing with Langlois's culpability for a very serious fire in 1959 that destroyed an estimated five thousand reels of nitrate film (a very rough estimate because of the secrecy that characterized all of the Cinémathèque's operations under Langlois). The nitrate prints, many of them borrowed, had apparently been waiting to be shipped for several weeks. They were stacked in an open courtyard, in high summer, under a glass canopy that acted like a giant magnifying glass. Roud's spin on this deplorable and predictable loss is

to suggest that nitrate films were common and that every archives had experienced similar disasters--as though all film archivists were criminally irresponsible in the treatment of nitrate films!

Perhaps the most valuable part of the Roud's biography is the introduction by François Truffault. In thirteen elegantly written pages he provides an intimate and provocative portrait of a man he knew very well, and a precise, participant's account of the battle for control of the Cinémathèque française between February and April 1968 that became known as *l'affaire Cinémathèque*.

The battle started when André Malraux, hardly a philistine in matters artistic and intellectual, as Minister for Culture, tried to remove Langlois on allegations of financial and administrative mismanagement. "Some 20 million francs had been spent on the Cinémathèque in the previous ten years," Malraux explained, and "if the Cinémathèque française was born of the personal efforts of Henri Langlois, it has long since ceased to be a private enterprise and has become an institution responsible for providing a genuine public service."²⁵

At the heart of the concern were the state and location of the national collection. "Of thousands of reels of films stored at Bois d'Arcy," Malraux said, "many are in deplorable condition... 1500 copies of films have been made since 1963 and we don't know where they are."²⁶

It was a genuine complaint. Even François Truffault, Langlois's staunchest defender and the first on the barricade outside the Cinémathèque when the news was announced that Langlois had been removed, was prepared to concede that money intended for preservation work had been regularly diverted into film exhibition and the museum project. As he pointed out in a later interview, "If the Cinémathèque had unlimited funds at its disposal a museum might find its proper place there ... The Cinémathèque's major function must be the preservation of nitrate based prints... And the money spent on the museum would have enabled at least 500 nitrate prints to have been copied on safety stock."²⁷ This is a very conservative estimate.

Malraux lost the battle because he was a member of a rigidly statist government that had lost the confidence of the electorate, and because Langlois refused to respond to Malraux or his officials either publicly or privately and instead appealed to the *enfants de Cinémathèque*, led by Truffault, Goddard, and Rivette, to defend his interests. Truffault and the others were skillful propagandists (they had developed their skills as polemicists at the *Cahiers du Cinéma* before becoming filmmakers) with access to dozens of journals in film and the arts, and with many contacts in the media.

L'affaire Cinémathèque was just one of many issues that sent students and workers into the streets that summer. As Truffault recalls, "With the passage of time, it seems obvious that the demonstrations for Langlois were to the events of May 1968 what the trailer is to the feature film coming soon."²⁸

Langlois's supporters included almost every prominent name in the French film industry in the sixties and they were prepared to sit-in at the Cinémathèque until the government restored Langlois as director. It was an astonishing display of loyalty. It is difficult even to imagine a set of circumstances that would bring a community served by an archives in this country out in sufficient numbers to force a government to reverse itself in this way. And this was a government led by Charles de Gaulle!

The Government gave in and allowed Langlois back into the Cinémathèque (he had been physically locked out) as director on 22 April 1968. The government then retaliated by systematically starving the Cinémathèque of funds until Langlois was forced to accept part-time teaching assignments--at Concordia University in Montréal for several years--in order to make ends meet.

It can be argued that it was a pyrrhic victory. Langlois remained at the Cinémathèque until his death in January 1977. The real losers were the films in his care.

Langlois, by all accounts from both friends and foes, was obsessed with his project for a museum of the cinema that would express his personal vision of film history. The fact that every penny spent on the museum delayed preservation and restoration work and risked the loss of films in the collection appeared to be a risk he was prepared to take. It is difficult to tell from the evidence at hand whether Langlois genuinely did not believe that nitrate *can wait!*²⁹

Of the two biographies, Roud's is shorter and better written, but essentially anecdotal, and generally unreliable.³⁰ The Myrent-Langlois account is more firmly rooted in documentation (Georges Langlois, Henri's younger brother, did legal work for the Cinémathèque for many years) but is equally biased in favour of the legend rather than the man or the archivist. Glenn Myrent was one of those young men who came to the Cinémathèque to do research and stayed as one of Langlois's acolytes.

The Myrent-Langlois collaboration is based on Cinémathèque records, personal and family records, and interviews assembled by Georges Langlois for a memoir long before he decided to join forces with Myrent in 1986. Roud appears to have had access to this material, or Myrent-Langlois may have read Roud too diligently (*A Passion for Films* was published three years before the French edition of *First Citizen of Cinema*), because there are narrative passages and anecdotes in Roud and Myrent-Langlois which are identical.

The Myrent-Langlois collaboration is surprisingly more forthcoming about Henri Langlois's personal life than Roud's is, considering that his brother was a co-author. Although Roud speculates about Langlois's apparently platonic relationships with the powerful women in his life, primarily Mary Meerson and Catherine Heseltine, it is curious that he fails to offer the simple explanation, documented by Myrent-Langlois, that he was a homosexual. This was well known in Langlois's circle of friends and collaborators, and since this also explains the string of young men who attached themselves to the Cinémathèque over the years and were willing to put up with his impossible working habits (Langlois practically invented management by crisis), and may have been a contribution factor in the string of explosive social and professional relationships that marked Langlois's career, Roud's reticence on the subject leaves the reader of his biography with less real understanding of a man who by all accounts was extremely difficult to know.

The Myrent-Langlois biography has one added attraction that may well be worth the price of the book. The last fifty pages or so have cartoons drawn at the right-hand corners that function like a flip-book. Primitive animation! They begin with a drawing of Langlois as a thin young man who comes across one can of film. As he ages, and puts on weight, the number of film cans increases until at the end only the outline of a grossly obese man can be detected behind an immense pile of film cans. Portrait of the archivist driven to excess at work and at play!

Anthony Slide provides a highly unreliable account of film preservation in the United States. I began to lose confidence when reading the introduction. Slide rightly attributes the “nitrate won’t wait” slogan to buttons I had made for a FIAF Congress in the early sixties, but gets the slogan wrong.³¹ My original version was “nitrate can’t wait,” a subtle but significant difference in the message, I always thought. My successor, Larry Karr, changed the slogan. Slide then goes on to state: “Nitrate makes its own rules. If kept at a low temperature and humidity it can be stored safely *and indefinitely*” (my emphasis).³² This is simply not true and dangerous misinformation for a novice film archivist. Proper storage can slow down the rate of deterioration, but it will not be stopped completely. As it deteriorates with age, and wears out with use, nitrate (and all film) costs more to copy. Eventually it has to be copied frame by frame, every frame may require adjustments in alignment and exposure, and it takes 1,440 exposures to copy one minute of film.

For some reason Slide is hostile to almost all film archivists in the United States: “Today most archival bureaucrats are not interested in film preservation, only in self-preservation.”³³ The only exception to this blanket condemnation appears to be those who work at the Film and Television Archives at the University of California at Los Angeles, where he still has friends. Everyone else in the field is either corrupt or incompetent or both.

This reviewer is obviously sensitive to the stream of invective Slide aims at the American Film Institute. It leads to some significant distortions of fact and understanding. At one point he states, “Because NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) funding is channelled through the AFI rather than given directly to the archives active in the preservation field, the Institute is able to claim credit for projects in which it has had no involvement.”³⁴ This totally ignores the AFI’s role in publicizing the need and securing the funding in the first place, in coordinating the programmes in order to prevent duplication of effort, and in maintaining contacts with the industry to establish a climate of trust that promotes cooperation and film deposits.

Slide is either wrong or confused on so many aspect of film archives work that it would take another monograph of equal length to correct the defects. Take for example the troublesome issues relating to the ethics of restoration. Slide appears to be unable to distinguish between *commercial* restorations such as the *recut* and *extended* version of *Metropolis* with a driving rock score and meticulous restorations of originals such as *Gone With the Wind*, *Snow White*, or *Lawrence of Arabia*. Archivists have no quarrel with the latter, in fact they welcome the interest the industry is developing in preserving its own past, but they have as many reservations about the former as they do over the colourization of black and white films.

It is difficult to take this work seriously. It is amusing to note that Slide himself quotes a letter from John Kuiper, who directed the film preservation programme at the Library of Congress during the sixties and seventies, in which Kuiper refuses to comment on the chapter dealing with the programme at the Library on the grounds that it is “full of holes, omissions and distortions.”³⁵ Kuiper might have easily extended that comment to include the whole book.

In *Keepers of the Frame*, Penelope Houston has provided a lively account of the film preservation movement from the perspective of a long-time observer of the film world (as editor of *Sight and Sound*) and as an employee of the British Film Institute,

the parent institution for the National Film and Television Archive,³⁶ the United Kingdom's official national film archives. She too centres her story on two archivists she knew well: Henri Langlois, the man with the passion for film; and Ernest Lindgren, the cautious educator turned archivist-manager of the National Film and Television Archive. While she struggles to be fair, it is clear that her sympathies lie with Langlois as a showman, eager to share his treasures with the world, rather than with Lindgren as an archivist concerned primarily with preserving the past for posterity. She once asked Lindgren when "posterity" would arrive!

Houston's assessment of the "keepers of the frame" is essentially eurocentric with the focus on the development of the BFI's sober archival programme in contrast to the cultural activities of the more flamboyant cinémathèques on the Continent. She sees the twin responsibilities of archives, that of preserving the film heritage *and* providing access to it, as often in conflict, with most archives tending to tilt towards making them accessible now, even at the risk of damaging the sole surviving copy. She quotes with approval the director of the British Film Institute as stating that the policy must be "preservation with a purpose,"³⁷ and agrees with the current perception that access is a right.

For Houston the irony is that film archives have finally adopted a more aggressive stance--"the mood has become almost one of exploit or die"--at a time when the competition from other sources of old films, cable television, and video rentals and sales has made archives much less significant in terms of access.³⁸ Robert Rosen, the director of the Film and Television Archives at the University of California at Los Angeles, observed that some video stores probably hold bigger stocks than some archives.

Lindgren, the founder and long-time curator of the National Film and Television Archive, was clearly an exponent of the protect, preserve, and *then* show school. Some thirty years after he began to collect films, a committee of inquiry established by the BFI discovered that less than ten per cent of the collection was accessible, i.e., that reference copies were available.

In this case it was not just the percentage, but the content of the films that were accessible that concerned the inquiry: too many of them were also available elsewhere (notably in the United States), which indicated that duplication of effort was taking place. As Houston points out, only five per cent of the total collection is liable to be called upon for programming, and it is always the same five per cent. The pressure on an archives to duplicate the effort of other archives in preserving the same limited number of classics can be intense. Because a film is available in *one* country, archivists have learned over the years, does not guarantee that it will be available in *their* country. As Ernest Lindgren used to remind me frequently, "The English Channel has been closed twice in my lifetime!"

Houston is particularly adept at probing the key issues in film archives. On selection, for example, she recognizes the need but accepts the fact that all criteria are flawed. She is perceptive enough to realize that Langlois's celebrated dictum that "the archivist should not play God" was fine in spirit but impossible to implement in practise. Decisions are made every day and in the process some films are acquired or preserved, and others are left to fend for themselves in the real world, or on the shelves of the archives. Even Matuszewski, writing in 1898, saw the need to select. Lindgren, who

had begun his career in 1934 with the philosophy that “every film has a historical value of some kind,”³⁹ ended up operating three selection committees—one for science, one for history, and one for art—which he regarded as a necessary evil, and politically useful when the selections were contentious on moral or political grounds.

Unlike Slide, who is particularly muddled on this point, Houston clearly understands and appreciates the complex, tenuous, and unpredictable relationship that has always existed between the film industry and the film archive. The archives are almost totally dependant on the goodwill of the industry both to acquire films and to make them accessible: even with legal deposit, those who control the rights control all access beyond consultation on the premises of the archives. All exhibition programmes ultimately depend on the cooperation of the industry.

Houston is very good at framing the important questions, even if the answers are elusive. She is aware that a film in an archives “does not exist until it has been catalogued” (unless, of course, the archives is being run by Langlois!), but she wonders if the explosion in image making in recent years (“the democratization of film making”) will simply overwhelm the world’s archives in terms of both intellectual and physical processing. Film archivists may lie awake nights worrying that the next equivalent of the Zapruder footage of the Kennedy assassination may be slipping through their fingers if they turn the amateurs away from their doors, but tight selection, within the means of the archives, “is essential if the baby is not to drown in the bath water preserved with it.”⁴¹

The national programmes under development in Canada and the United States recognize the enormity of the task and stress cooperation with the industry so that costs in protecting the heritage can be shared. Publicly supported institutions can then concentrate on unedited footage and the so-called *orphan films*, films for which there is no longer a producer or distributor of record.⁴²

In her chapter on restoration, “Definitive Versions,” Houston is, again, both perceptive and informative. Slide would be well-advised to read it. I do not always agree with her observations on the ethics of restoration, but I am fully in agreement that length is not always a virtue. Some recent restorations have replaced footage that the director cut because the film did not work with an audience. Restoring it leaves a hybrid that is neither the *director’s cut* (the issue of *artistic intent*) nor the version the audience experienced when the film was first released.

Houston’s well-written account is only disappointing in the short shrift she gives film preservation programmes in Canada and the United States. She acknowledges the work of pioneers like Iris Barry at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and James Card at Eastman House in Washington, but there is no sense of the tremendous growth in media archives of all kinds in the past quarter-century and the development of coordinated national programmes in Canada and the United States.

Borde, Houston, and the Langlois biographers are writing about an era when one person was so closely identified with an archives or cinemathèque that it was almost impossible to think of the one without the other. The 108 members of FIAF now fall somewhere between institutions that still function “with one person at the center, part Christ, part Bakounine [Bakunin], who saves film like one saves souls” and institutions where one finds “lab technicians in immaculate white coats, and anglo-saxon lawyers as the mechanics of copyright.”⁴³

Film archives have become respectable members of the heritage infrastructure as institutions responsible for records of our collective past. In Canada and the United States, recent initiatives, sponsored by government but involving the private and public sectors, have led to the drafting of national programmes to coordinate the effort and to focus public attention on the need to protect and to facilitate access to the moving image heritage.⁴⁴

There are still enough strong personalities in the movement to generate heat as well as light in exchanges at conferences, but for most of the new recruits there is too much to do, and too many fiscal and technological challenges to face, to waste energy in personality conflicts. Besides, heat is bad for film!

Notes

- 1 The first documented exhibition to a *paying* audience in Canada took place on 17 July 1896. The Holland Brothers used Edison's projecting kinoscope in a tent-show in Ottawa.
- 2 Raymond Borde, *Les Cinémathèques* (Paris, 1984), p. 21.
- 3 Known by its French acronym, the Fédération internationale des archives du film, has its headquarters in Brussels. There is a brief history, *50 ans d'archives du film* (Brussels, 1988), and FIAF has published a number of monographs resulting from the work of international committees in cataloguing, preservation, etc., and from seminars held as part of the annual conferences. See *International Film Archive CD-ROM*, the index to film periodicals published semi-annually by FIAF, for a list of publications.
- 4 I have excluded guides to collections and the proceedings of seminars, conferences, etc. See the note on FIAF above, and such publications as *Documents that Move and Speak: Audiovisual Archives in the New Information Age: Proceedings of a Symposium Organized for the International Council of Archives by the National Archives of Canada* (New York, 1992). There are also a few *festschriften* honouring film archivists, but they tend to concentrate on film history rather than the activities of film archives. One of the more notable is Valentin Knor and Daniel Frida, ed., *To je mi peknà historie: vzpominki na Myrtila Fridu [Myrtil Frida Remembered]* (Prague, 1989). Frida was one of the founding curators of Filmovy Archiv.
- 5 The BFI's film *library* became the film *archives* in 1935, but the question of whether films, as edited *publications* as opposed to unedited footage and productions that were never intended for public exhibition, belong in libraries or archives is still with us. High Taylor, my boss at the National Archives when I started up the film programme, and I have been debating this question for twenty years without either side convincing the other. I stand for inclusion, of course! For an airing of some of the arguments on both sides of the question and on the treatment of non-textual media in archives see "Terry Cook, "The Tyranny of the Medium: A Comment on 'Total Archives'," *Archivaria* 9 (Winter 1979-80), pp. 141-49; Andrew Birrell, "The Tyranny of Tradition," *Archivaria* 10 (Summer 1980), pp. 249-52; Ernest Dick et al., "Total Archives Come Apart," *Archivaria* 11 (Winter 1980-81), pp. 224-27; and Terry Cook, "Media Myopia," *Archivaria* 12 (Summer 1981), pp. 146-57.
- 6 The terms are now used interchangeably, although the French term, *cinémathèque*, originally implied an organization that concentrated on access rather than on preservation. Some writers in English use *cinematheque* to denote a non-profit organization and *film archives* to denote a government organization, but the usage is not standard and the distinction when the non-profit organization may be almost entirely supported by government subvention is not very helpful. Léon Moussinac is credited with coining the word "cinematheque" in an article in *Cinémagazine* in 1921. He referred to a "bibliothèque du cinématographe, ou cinémathèque." In *Panoramique du cinéma* (Paris, 1929), Moussinac outlined the role a cinematheque could play in the cultural life of the nation.
- 7 Borde, *Les Cinémathèques*, p. 67.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- 9 Film stock for the commercial cinema was manufactured from nitrocellulose, an inherently unstable and flammable compound. When the industry shifted to acetate stock (safety film) in about 1950, many producers and distributors considered the original prints and negatives on nitrate stock as nothing more than hazardous waste.
- 10 Borde, *Les Cinémathèques*, p. 82.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

- 12 Ibid., p. 122.
- 13 Ibid., p. 110. In defence of Langlois's position on this issue, it should be pointed out that the members of FIAF resisted establishing a *public* union catalogue of their film holdings until very recently and are only now collaborating on what is basically a list of their *silent* film holdings. See note 3 above on *International Film Archive CD-ROM*.
- 14 Ibid., p. 115.
- 15 The reference to "treasures" comes from a description of Langlois offered by Jean Cocteau, "le dragon qui veille sur nos trésors" [the dragon who watches over our treasures]. It is the epitaph on Langlois's extraordinary tombstone in the Montparnasse Cemetery which includes stills from 150 of his favourite films mounted under glass.
- 16 Borde's source for many of the *facts* are two *dossiers* published in *Cahiers de la Cinémathèque*, Nos. 22 and 23-24, April and Christmas 1977. These *dossiers* entitled *La Cinémathèque française: Recherche de la vérité*, are devastating indictments of Langlois's management of the Cinémathèque, published just months after Langlois died.
- 17 Borde, *Les Cinémathèques*, p. 179. Le Pontel was essentially a warehouse, totally lacking in climate control, which Langlois used to store French and American sound features (1930 to 1950) from the nitrate era, films which were deposited with the Cinémathèque française by the thousands when the French Government banned the commercial storage of nitrate film in the early fifties. Very few of them had been copied. Conditions were probably similar to those under which the National Film Board of Canada stored nitrate films before the fire of 1 July 1967 wiped out what amounted to half the nitrate film still in existence in Canada. In sharp contrast when a fire at Henderson's Film Laboratories, operated by the National Film and Television Archive in London, in July 1993 destroyed the nitrate negatives of 304 feature films, the inquiry found that *all* of them had already been copied.
- 18 Some indication of the philosophy that Langlois shared with his new colleagues can be gleaned from an exchange of correspondence between him and Maria Adreana Prolo, founder of the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin. There is little on the practical management of either film museums or archives in this exchange, but there is a wealth of insightful commentary on pioneer filmmakers and how their work relates to the theatre, music, and art of their times. See Sergio Toffeti, ed., *le dragon et l'alouette* (Turin, 1992).
- 19 Borde, *Les Cinémathèques*, p. 111.
- 20 Penelope Houston, *Keepers of the Frame: The Film Archives* (London, 1994), p. 53.
- 21 Ibid., p. 49.
- 22 Richard Roud, *A Passion for Films: Henri Langlois and the Cinémathèque Française* (New York, 1983), p. xxviii.
- 23 Glenn Myrent and Georges P. Langlois, *Henri Langlois: First Citizen of Cinema* [French edition: *Henri Langlois, premier citoyen du cinéma*, 1986] (New York, 1995), p. 150.
- 24 A conclusion based on conversations I have had with Roud when we both worked at the British Film Institute in the late fifties.
- 25 Myrent and Langlois, *Henri Langlois*, p. 253.
- 26 Ibid., p. 253. Malraux might have found a partial explanation for the disposition of the prints in the record of exchanges with other archives, if Langlois had kept records! Such exchanges (on a metre for metre of film basis under FIAF regulations), enrich the collection but they usually mean that the same small number of *classics* are printed again and again while other films in need of preservation deteriorate in the vaults.
- 27 Roud, *A Passion for Films*, p. 178.
- 28 Ibid., p. viii.
- 29 Despite the real cost to the Cinémathèque and to the nation, the museum, which opened in 1972 at the Palais de Chaillot, remains a striking achievement. It was renamed in his honour in 1980. See Huguette Marquand Ferreux, *Musée du cinéma Henri Langlois* (Paris, 1991), 3 vols.
- 30 Roud's sources are primarily the two remarkable women, Mary Meerson and Lotte Eisner, who administered the Cinémathèque for Langlois and functioned as surrogate mothers/wives all his adult life.
- 31 Anthony Slide, *Nitrate Won't Wait: A History of Film Preservation in the United States* (Jefferson, 1992) p. 3.
- 32 Ibid., p. 3.
- 33 Ibid., p. 7.
- 34 Ibid., p. 74.
- 35 Ibid., p. 44.

- 36 Television has been part of the mandate of the National Film Archive, as it was called for more than fifty years, for many years but the name change is a fairly recent public admission that responsibility for the moving image heritage must include the product of television broadcasting and independent video as well as film.
- 37 Houston, *Keepers of the Frame*, p. 87.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- 40 As a veteran of an attempt to develop guidelines for film selection I can confirm that it is not an easy task! See Sam Kula, *The Archival Appraisal of Moving Images: A RAMP Study with Guidelines* (Paris, 1983).
- 41 Houston, *Keepers of the Frame*, p. 114.
- 42 See Allen Eyles and David Meeker, eds., *Missing Believed Lost: The Great British Film Search* (London, 1992). It is essentially a descriptive list of one hundred films that are not known to be in any archives or collection. In the introduction, Clyde Jeavons, Curator of the National Film and Television Archive in London, defines *orphan films* as largely those that were made outside the major studios. These films found an audience and played their role in the popular culture of their day and quickly faded from view. Jeavons wryly admits that his archives probably had the opportunity to acquire some of these films at the time they were first released and declined to do so. See also Gary Carey, *Lost Films* (New York, 1970) and Charles Tarbox, *Lost Films, 1895-1917* (Los Angeles, 1983).
- 43 Borde, *Les Cinémathèques*, p. 246.
- 44 National Archives of Canada, *Fading Away: Strategic Options to Ensure the Protection of and Access to Our Audio-Visual Memory* (Ottawa, 1995) and *Redefining Film Preservation* (Washington, 1994).