

# INTERNATIONAL FILM MUSEUM

*Britain, U.S., France and Germany  
Found New Organisation*

## NON-COMMERCIAL EXCHANGE OF FAMOUS PICTURES

*Agreement Signed This Week*

Representatives of Britain, France, Germany and the United States of America signed in Paris yesterday the document founding an International Federation of Film Archives.

*The purpose of the new organisation is to facilitate the international exchange of historical, educational and artistic films between such bodies as the British National Film Library, the German Reichsfilmarchiv, the French Cinematheque Française and the American Museum of Modern Art.*

The new organisation is not concerned with commercial films and, in fact, membership of it is not open to any institution or organisation which could make use of its films for any commercial purpose whatsoever.

Mr. Oliver Bell, the Director of the British Film Institute and Honorary Librarian of the National Film Library, explains that in future the British Library, for example, would be able to get hold of working copies of the masterpieces of the past from their colleagues in other countries in the same way that they will be able to get hold of copies of such British classics as "The Life of Charles Peace" and other subjects in the National Film Library. In this way the national collections will each become full and representative historical

collections of the development of film art. At present, though all the material exists, no means has been found of exchanging it on an official basis.

The headquarters of the new Federation are to be in a room in the Palais Royal at Paris which has been put at its disposal by the French Government. The first President is Mr. John Abbott of the Museum of Modern Art, the Vice-President is Mr. Frank Hensel of the Reichsfilmarchiv, and the Treasurer Miss Vaughan of the British Film Institute.

# First Tango in Paris: The Birth of FIAF, 1936-1938

Christophe Dupin

Christophe Dupin: Senior Administrator of the International Federation of Film Archives and film historian (Brussels).

**“Only when film archives of different countries establish regular exchanges will one finally be able to know the true history of cinema.” Henri Langlois, 1936<sup>1</sup>**

**Author’s note:** *The origins of this article can be found in my research on the history of the British Film Institute, and in particular my analysis of the tempestuous relationship between Ernest Lindgren and Henri Langlois, two of the pioneers of the film archive movement.<sup>2</sup> During that research I became familiar with FIAF-related paper archives held by the British Film Institute (which I also catalogued) and the Cinémathèque française (where I could rely on the generous support of Laurent Mannoni). My subsequent appointment as FIAF Administrator gave me direct access to the Federation’s own archival records in Brussels, documenting three-quarters of a century of the film archive movement. Research in New York at The Museum of Modern Art revealed more evidence of early contacts between the first emerging film ar-*

*chives, and helped me complete the pre-war picture. The fact that relatively little has been written about the origins and formation of FIAF, added to the upcoming celebration of the 75th anniversary of the Federation in June 2013, convinced me to interpret these fascinating pre-war archival records in an article for the Journal of Film Preservation.*

FIAF’s official date of birth is generally recognized as 17 June 1938, as confirmed by the date of the “Agreement for the International Federation of Film Archives” signed in Paris by its four founder-members – the Cinémathèque française, Germany’s Reichsfilmarchiv, the British Film Institute, and the Museum of Modern Art Film Library. However, the seeds of this project of international co-operation had been planted several months, if not years, before, and the Federation did not become a fully operational organization for many more months.

The formation of each of the four founder-members of FIAF (between January 1934 and September 1936) is already well-documented

1. “Ce n’est que lorsqu’on aura établi, entre cinémathèques des différents pays, des échanges réguliers, que l’on pourra enfin connaître l’histoire vraie du cinéma.” Henri Langlois, “L’évolution des œuvres cinématographiques vues de France”, *La Cinématographie française*, no. 934, 26 September 1936, p.99.
2. See Christophe Dupin, “Je t’aime ... moi non plus: The Stormy Relationship Between Ernest Lindgren and Henri Langlois, Pioneers of the Film Archive Movement”, in Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Christophe Dupin (eds.), *The British Film Institute, the Government and Film Culture (1933-2000)*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012.

elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Instead, I would like to concentrate on the nature and evolution of the early relationships between these institutions, in order to understand how the idea of an international film archive network emerged, what obstacles came in the way of its establishment, and how the project managed to materialize despite the increasingly hostile international context of the late 1930s.

The setting-up of exchanges (of information, films, and related materials) between the first emerging film archives very soon after their formation (and, for some, even before that), was the result of the immediate realization by their founders that establishing international contacts was an absolute condition of their development. It would not only reinforce the legitimacy of their work and status at home, at a time when the preservation of the film heritage was a completely new and therefore unrecognized activity (yet a very expensive one), but also help them quickly expand, at an affordable price, their still modest collections of film classics. These like-minded people also only envisaged the history of the art of cinema in its universal dimension, and therefore it never crossed their minds to limit their film acquisitions to their national cinemas. In the initial outline of the future work of the MoMA Film Library, dated 17 April 1935, John Abbott (its first director) and his wife Iris Barry (its first curator) recognized that its "activities will rightly and needfully be international in scope".<sup>4</sup>

Of the future four members of FIAF, Nazi Germany's Reichsfilmarchiv was the first to be established, on 29 January 1934, even though it would only be officially inaugurated (by Hitler himself) in February 1935, by which time it already contained over 1200 films of "artistic or cultural importance". Joseph Goebbels, a cinema enthusiast who fully understood the

cultural and political value of film, seemed to have played a crucial role in its constitution. In 1935 the Reichsfilmarchiv already had a new director – Frank Hensel, who had been involved in the making of propaganda films for the National Socialist Party (which he had joined in 1928).<sup>5</sup> Having travelled a lot in his youth, he spoke very good English, which would be helpful in establishing international contacts with foreign archives.

In April that year, the Third Reich convened an International Film Congress in Berlin, attended by 1000 delegates of 24 national film industries. The remit of its 9th Special Committee was to discuss the question of film archives. The outcome of its deliberations was to recommend "the setting-up of a film repository in each country for the collection of films of cultural, educational, and scientific value or showing the development of film art. The producers in each country should be required to deliver a free copy of each of their films to the Repository. Each Repository would compile a catalogue of educational films and the various repositories would have contact with one another. As far as possible, a copy of all films produced in the respective countries, educational and otherwise, should be kept."<sup>6</sup> Later Hensel was to give himself credit "for having successfully prompted other countries to create their own film archives based on the German archive" at this congress,<sup>7</sup> but the evidence does not bear this out. Many countries had boycotted the event for political reasons. The MoMA Film Library and the BFI's National Film Library were already about to be launched, and it is unlikely that Langlois' Cinémathèque project owed much to the recommendations of the Berlin congress<sup>8</sup>. In November 1938 he would even declare to John Abbott that one of the real strengths of the FIAF project came from

3. See, for instance, Laurent Mannoni, *Histoire de la Cinémathèque française* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006); Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005); Christophe Dupin, "The Origins and Early Development of the National Film Library: 1929-1936", *Journal of Media Practice*, 7.3, 2006; Rolf Aurich, "Cinéaste, Collector, National Socialist: Frank Hensel and the Reichsfilmarchiv", *Journal of Film Preservation*, #64, April 2002.

4. John E. Abbott and Iris Barry, "An Outline of a Project for Founding the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art", 17 April 1935, reproduced in *Film History*, Autumn 1995, vol.7, no.3, p.325.

5. Rolf Aurich, op. cit., p.16.

6. Final Report of the Berlin International Film Congress April 25<sup>th</sup>–May 1<sup>st</sup> 1935, p.5. Source: BFI National Library, London.

7. Rolf Aurich, op. cit., pp.20-21.

8. Another international organization, strongly influenced this time by Fascist Italy – the International Institute of Educational Cinematography based in Rome – also showed an interest in the formation of film archives and in the facilitating of the circulation of (educational) films between countries in the early to mid-1930s. However, there is little evidence in the correspondence between the future founders of FIAF that they were influenced, even indirectly, by an organization that was always much more interested in film as a classroom tool than as an art form.



Henri Langlois' passport photograph, 1939



John Abbott and Iris Barry during their European tour, summer 1936.



Frank Hensel



Olwen Vaughan, 1938

the fact that unlike most other international film organizations of the 1930s, FIAF had not been initiated by the German-Italian axis.<sup>9</sup>

The first significant step towards the establishment of serious contacts between emerging film archives took place in the summer of 1936, on the occasion of the Abbotts' tour of Europe (25 May to 30 August), whose objective was "to search for noteworthy foreign films to add to the collection of the Film Library".<sup>10</sup> After a first operational year during which they had been looking west to Hollywood to secure prints of American silent films, which fed their first film programmes, they now turned to Europe. During that trip, the Abbotts met production companies, film directors, and anyone from whom they could obtain prints of notable (mainly silent) films. A less official aim of that trip was to assess the situation of emerging European film archives, to make contact with their leaders. In that respect, the MoMA Film Library played a pivotal role in connecting emerging film archives with each other. Just before setting off for Europe, Barry was invited by the BFI to write an article in *Sight and Sound*, in which she stated: "we represent only the American wing of a spontaneous and universal movement to preserve a record of the birth and development of the art of the cinema. An interchange both of information and of material between the various film archives – in Berlin, in Moscow, in Paris, in Stockholm, as well as in London and in New York – is what we must all very ardently desire."<sup>11</sup>

The first leg of their journey took them to London, where they were invited to present their work to the BFI's Board of Governors. Promises of mutual cooperation between MoMA and the BFI were made, but overall the Abbotts were not very impressed. They found the BFI's National Film Library plans rather vague and some of its governors "wholly disinterested".<sup>12</sup> They regretted that the BFI's primary concern was with the use of film in education, rather than in the

cultural and artistic aspects of the medium – a development which would indeed influence the work of the NFL in its formative years. They did, however, find a key ally in Olwen Vaughan, the Secretary of the BFI since May 1935. Unlike the rest of the BFI staff, Vaughan was truly interested in film as an art form. Besides her job at the BFI, she was running the BFI-affiliated London Film Institute Society, which programmed repertory films and invited filmmakers and critics to lecture about film.

While in London, the Abbotts were also interviewed by Ernest Lindgren, the discreet and diligent 26-year-old curator of the National Film Library, who was eager to learn about the work of an archive which he already saw as a model.<sup>13</sup> Despite his formal responsibility for the NFL, Lindgren was not directly involved in the pre-war international exchanges which led to the formation of FIAF, as his position in the BFI's hierarchy was considered too junior. It was Olwen Vaughan, as BFI Secretary, who took care of the BFI's international relations and therefore represented the NFL in any discussions with other archives. Her shared film interests with the Abbotts, and soon with Henri Langlois, as well as her language skills (she spoke excellent French), helped her retain that position until her resignation from the BFI in June 1945.<sup>14</sup>

In early June 1936, the Abbotts left London and crossed the English Channel, arriving in Paris in the midst of the general strike initiated after the election of the *Front Populaire* in May. They first met Yves Chataigneau, a diplomat working for the cultural service of the French foreign affairs ministry, who gave them a detailed overview of the French film industry and many useful contacts. Chataigneau was to play a crucial role in the development of exchanges between archives, and in the formation of FIAF two years later. Film historian Haidee Wasson rightly interprets the willingness of the French government to help MoMA (and soon other foreign archives) in that period as obvious cultural propaganda,

9. Letter from Henri Langlois to John Abbott, 6 November 1938, photocopied MoMA documents, FIAF Archive.

10. MoMA press release, [May 1936]. This and all other MoMA press releases mentioned in this article are available on the MoMA website, at <[www.moma.org/learn/resources/press\\_archives/1930s](http://www.moma.org/learn/resources/press_archives/1930s)>.

11. Iris Barry, "The Museum of Modern Art Film Library", *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1936, p.16.

12. Iris Barry diary of European trip, MoMA Collections.

13. Iris Barry diary of European trip, MoMA Collections.

14. Lindgren's absence from the pre-war international discussions largely explained his difficult relationship with Langlois (and Vaughan) in the post-war period. See Christophe Dupin, "Je t'aime...", op. cit., pp.58-60.

as it “promised recognition and an audience for films that otherwise had little chance of reaching American screens”.<sup>15</sup>

On 10 June they met Henri Langlois for the first time, and were immediately impressed by the 22-year-old Frenchman’s sheer enthusiasm and keenness to help them. Langlois had founded the Cercle du Cinema with his friend Georges Franju the previous year, and was already acquiring a collection of (mainly) silent classics, thanks to financial help from Paul Auguste Harlé, the director of the trade magazine *La Cinématographie française*, for which Langlois regularly wrote, and a fast-growing network of supporters enrolled among French filmmakers and producers.

Langlois offered to help the Abbotts acquire prints or, whenever possible, negatives of French classics, either from his own collections or via his contacts in the French film industry. Langlois had a genuine fascination for American cinema, and was immediately attracted to these two Americans, who shared not only his passion for film but also his interest in rescuing and showing the silent film heritage. He also understood early on that for the Cinémathèque française – which he finally registered in early September 1936 as a private “association” – to expand its collections in the context of extremely limited financial resources, it would have to rely on its networks, both in the French film industry and with the other emerging film archives. He appreciated what a great ally the MoMA Film Library could be, because of its already impressive collections, its contacts with Hollywood, its relative wealth, and the efficient organization of both its preservation and exhibition activities. There was also, of course, the question of the legitimacy of the fledgling Cinémathèque française, as the French government had already set up a Cinémathèque nationale in 1933. Led by the photographer Laure Albin Guillot, this institution never lived up to its official name, its collections consisting mainly of newsreels. While in Paris Barry met Albin Guillot, and she was hardly impressed: “She was bitter but kindly; obviously can’t help us,” she later reported.

15. Haidee Wasson, op. cit., p.118.

In this context it is easy to understand why Langlois had everything to gain by being as helpful as he possibly could.

After France, the Abbotts travelled to Germany, where they visited the Reichsfilmarchiv in Berlin and were impressed by this “large and well organized” archive (and by the international scope of its collections), but also by the reception they got from the Nazi dignitaries.<sup>16</sup> To their great surprise, they were granted full access to all the materials they requested, including “German films made before the present regime or by Jewish producers, actors, etc.”<sup>17</sup> The only exception was Sternberg’s *Der blaue Engel*, “on the grounds that it was a pornographic film, showing Germany and Germans in a very unpleasant light and therefore they did not wish it to be shown again abroad”. Following their return to New York, the Abbotts would receive no fewer than 29 films, “delivered in excellent condition” (unlike those received from other archives), as well as stills, posters, and other printed materials.

They then travelled to Moscow, where they found the ideological gap between America and the USSR a serious hindrance to conducting business in that country, and to Sweden.<sup>18</sup> In their final report on the European trip, John Abbott did emphasize the importance of the contacts established with other film archives in Europe, but he observed that (except for Germany) “none of these institutions seems to have attacked the problem actually of preserving (as apart from collecting) film, some of these collections are very scrappy and others composed of sadly worn or fragmentary material.”<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the person who maintained the most active relationship with the Abbotts after their return to the USA was Henri Langlois, as his sustained correspond-

16. Curiously, Frank Hensel was not mentioned at all in Barry’s European trip report.

17. Iris Barry, “Germany: First Visit, June 18 to June 27”, European Trip Diary, MoMA Collections.

18. If they failed to bring back any films from Moscow, they did however convince Jay Leyda, a young American film scholar who had been working with Eisenstein, to follow them back to New York. He would soon become the MoMA Film Library’s Assistant Curator.

19. John Abbott, *Report of the Museum of Modern Art Film Library, as of November 6, 1936*, typewritten document, p.1. MoMA Collections.

# THE LONDON FILM INSTITUTE SOCIETY

(Branch of the British Film Institute)

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of the Cinemateque Française, Paris,

who will be introduced by HUGH GRAY, of London Films,

with illustrations from the following films ;

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Marey and Reynaud

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Georges Melies

ILLUSIONS

LA CONQUETE DU POLE

### THE FIRST CARTOON

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### THE FIRST FEATURE

Ferdinand Zecca

THE LIFE OF CHRIST

### COMEDY

Max Linder

### THE POPULAR FILM DRAMA

Fantomas

### THE ART FILM

Abel Gance

LA ROUE

Germaine Dulac

LE SOURIRE DE Mme BEUDET

### THE FRENCH SCHOOL

Jean Renoir

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Rene Clair

LES DEUX TIMIDES

Jean Epstein

LA CHUTE DE LA MAISON USHER

Cavalcanti

EN RADE

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ence with the Abbotts (usually Barry, who often made an effort to write in French) throughout 1936-1937 seems to attest. In July 1936, Langlois sent a list of the films in his collections to Barry, who requested a number of French 1920s avant-garde films for MoMA, with a view to adding them to her upcoming series of film programmes. Having obtained the agreement of rights-holders, Langlois shipped several prints to New York for copying (including *La Chute de la Maison Usher* and *La Souriante Madame Beudet*) and allowed MoMA to have copies made in Paris of his negatives of *Fièvre*, *La Coquille et le clergyman*, and other films. In return he requested copies of *Intolerance*, *Paris qui dort*, and several Méliès films. In the following months, however, he started showing some frustration as MoMA took some time to reciprocate his initial gesture (the official reason was that the Abbotts had problems obtaining the permission of American producers to send copies of their films to the largely unknown Cinémathèque française).<sup>20</sup> Later in 1937, he would protest about the non-return of some of his prints, as he needed them urgently for a screening.<sup>21</sup> As for Barry, she complained about the bad quality of the prints sent by Langlois, which MoMA's Film Library technician had to clean and repair before they could be copied.<sup>22</sup> Although very cordial, the partnership was therefore not without occasional frustration for both parties.

The first batch of MoMA films finally arrived at the Cinémathèque française in early 1937. Langlois, who appreciated the value of gala screenings to enhance the prestige of the Cinémathèque, took this opportunity to organize a special screening of Méliès' *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, which was part of the shipment, to which he invited the filmmaker himself and the press, to celebrate officially the first exchanges of films between MoMA and the Cinémathèque.<sup>23</sup> Throughout 1937, films did not perhaps travel back and forth across the Atlantic at the pace first hoped for, but the bond between the two institutions remained strong. When it became clear that one of the main obstacles to the cir-

culatation of film prints between the two partners would be the significant customs duties to be paid, Langlois offered a way around this by using his acquaintance with the diplomat Yves Chataigneau to organize the shipment of prints between Paris and New York via the French diplomatic pouch. In September 1937, when Langlois heard of the imminent destruction of a large collection of silent negatives of the Éclair company, which had produced many important French films from its foundation in 1907 until its bankruptcy in 1920, his first reaction was to cable MoMA to beg them to purchase the collection, as the Cinémathèque was unable to afford it. The Abbotts declined, but showed an interest in acquiring some of the best bits (including the Zigomar and Nick Carter series).<sup>24</sup>

Exchanges between the two Franco-American partners in that period were not limited to film prints. Their correspondence shows the importance of exchanging film stills to publicize their respective programmes, as well as posters and other printed materials. Langlois, for instance, became very interested in the film course which the Abbotts were giving at Columbia University and asked for a detailed course programme.<sup>25</sup> A keen collector of all things cinematic, he also requested the Film Library's help for a "cinema exhibition of a new kind" which he was planning to curate at the Cinémathèque; in return he offered to lend the exhibition to MoMA, an offer which was reluctantly declined because of the forthcoming closure of the MoMA building (the museum would only re-open in its current location in June 1939, just in time to host the first FIAF congress).<sup>26</sup>

If the collaboration between Langlois and the Abbotts in 1936-37 was probably the most sustained one, it was not the only one between two film archives. Although no correspondence between the Abbotts or Langlois and Olwen Vaughan seems to have survived, the BFI Secretary did start exchanging information, and to some extent films, with MoMA following the Abbotts' European trip, and a little

20. Letter from Langlois to Barry, 20 December 1936, MoMA Collections.

21. Letter from Langlois to Barry, 30 March 1937, MoMA Collections.

22. Letter from Barry to Langlois, 19 November 1936, MoMA Collections.

23. "Échanges de films anciens entre cinémathèques", *La Cinématographie française*, 12 February 1937, p.11.

24. Langlois would eventually find a strategy to acquire the Éclair collection from the rights-holders. According to Laurent Mannoni, "Iris Barry certainly made the mistake of her life by declining this acquisition." Laurent Mannoni, *op. cit.*, p.61.

25. Letter from Langlois to Barry, 13 October 1937, MoMA Collections.

26. Letter from Langlois to Barry, 9 February 1937, and letter from Barry to Langlois, 13 April 1937. MoMA Collections.

later with the Cinémathèque française (the BFI received several prints for preservation, notably Renoir's *Nana* from Langlois, and two early Disney films – *Skeleton Dance* and *Steamboat Willie* – from MoMA<sup>27</sup>). The connection between the BFI and the Cinémathèque was established, probably sometime in 1937, via the Brazilian-born filmmaker Alberto Cavalcanti, who was well-known on both sides of the English Channel and happened to be friends with both Vaughan and Langlois. Vaughan also received help from her French and American counterparts with the programming of her London Film Institute Society. She even invited Langlois to lecture there several times in this period.

In June 1937, Langlois wrote an important article in *La Cinématographie française*, in which he summed up the development of film archives around the world to date and emphasized the importance of the exchanges between these growing institutions. The article confirmed the pivotal role he saw for his Cinémathèque in the emergence of an international film archive movement. The previous year, in a hand-drawn organigram representing his personal vision of the role of the Cinémathèque in the international network of film archives, Langlois had already made it very clear what central role he thought his Cinémathèque should play. For Laurent Mannoni, "this extraordinary drawing reveals Langlois' ambition for his Cinémathèque, destined in his opinion to become the heart and lung of all cultural work around film heritage".<sup>28</sup> As confirmed by this drawing, besides his partnership with the MoMA Film Library and the BFI Langlois developed a friendly relationship with a number of embryonic cinémathèques around Europe in the pre-war period, in particular those in Milan, Brussels, and Basel (the future Cineteca Italiana, Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique, and Cinémathèque suisse). He acted as a very active (and quite proprietary) spokesman for these institutions *vis-à-vis* the MoMA Film Library and the BFI.

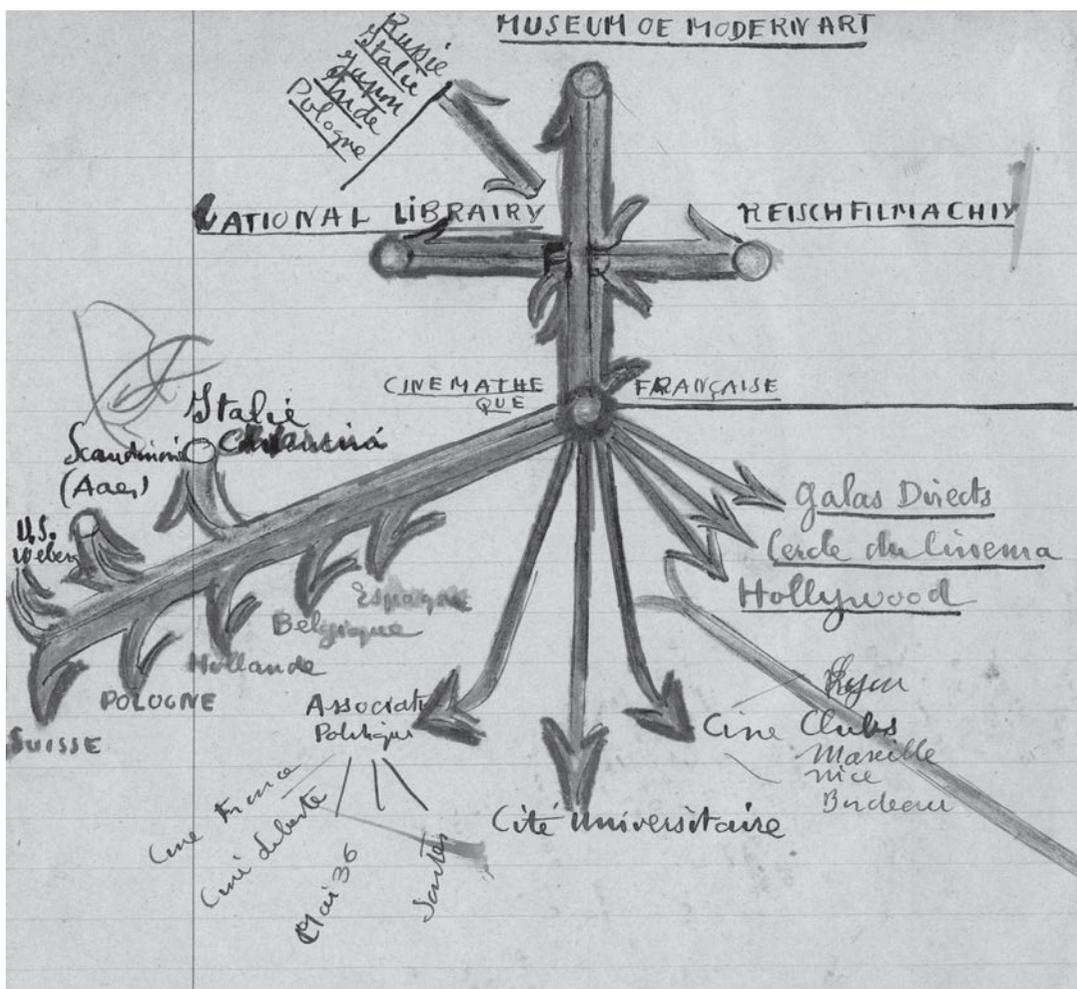
Between 1936 and 1938, if the Cinémathèque française, the BFI, and the MoMA Film Library had developed a friendly and, to a degree, productive relationship, there seems to be little evidence of a similar sustained partnership between these three and the Reichsfilmarchiv in that period, following the initial encounter between the Abbotts and their German counterparts in Berlin in the summer of 1936. In the fast-deteriorating international climate of that period, this is hardly surprising. What is more surprising is how the Reichsfilmarchiv would suddenly reappear on the international stage and take an important part in the foundation of the International Federation of Film Archives in 1938, via its representative Frank Hensel.

The need for a more permanent and officially recognized bond between New York, Paris, and London, and for the consolidation of bilateral co-operation into a more global system of exchanges, started to emerge in early 1938. Langlois played a key role in this new development, but once again the Abbotts provided the opportunity for the three institutions to meet and develop the existing partnership further, via a second trip to Europe. The pretext this time was an exhibition, "Trois siècles d'art aux États-Unis", organized by MoMA at the Jeu de Paume museum in Paris at the invitation of the French government.<sup>29</sup> This groundbreaking exhibition was not only the first comprehensive display of American art in Europe, but also the first to present film alongside painting, sculpture, graphic arts, architecture, and photography. Abbott and Barry had devised the film section of the exhibition together: Abbott supervised its installation, while Barry contributed a short history of American film for the exhibition catalogue. The film section included three 50-minute programmes illustrating the development of American cinema from 1895 to the present, shown twice daily, a display of 250 film stills, and a special exhibition on the making of a contemporary film (the recent Selznick production of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*).

27. 1938 BFI Annual Report, p.4.

28. Laurent Mannoni, *op. cit.*, p.48.

29. The principle of this exhibition had been agreed with the French authorities during the Abbotts' 1936 trip to Paris.



Hand-drawn schematic representation of the film archive world by Langlois, c. 1936 (detail)

Langlois was particularly excited by the news of the Abbotts' trip and the prospect of a get-together. On 26 February, he wrote to Barry: "we are waiting for you, but also Miss Vaughan and the young men from Milan with the greatest impatience".<sup>30</sup> Barry replied that her husband would arrive in Paris on 2 May and was eager to discuss their mutual business at once (she would join her husband in Paris a few weeks later).<sup>31</sup>

Abbott and Langlois probably discussed the possibility of establishing a more formal framework for the exchanges between film archives

during their meeting(s) in early May. Existing documentary evidence shows that the original idea seems to have come from Langlois.<sup>32</sup> By initiating the project, Langlois hoped that the Cinémathèque would play a central and controlling role in the future organization.

The "Trois siècles d'art aux États-Unis" exhibition opened with a private view on 24 May 1938. Later accounts confirmed that the event, hosted by the Abbotts, was attended by Vaughan, Langlois, and Frank Hensel, and

30. "Nous vous attendons en Europe avec la plus grande impatience, aussi bien d'ailleurs vous autres que Miss Vaughan et les jeunes gens de Milan."

Handwritten letter from Henri Langlois to Iris Barry, 26 February 1938, Langlois folder, MoMA Collections.

31. Letter from Iris Barry to Henri Langlois, 25 April 1938, photocopied MoMA documents, FIAF Archive.

32. Over the next few years Langlois would never miss an opportunity to remind his partners of his key role in the formation of FIAF. Abbott confirmed it on a number of occasions, including in a letter to Langlois on 28 June 1938, which he concluded by writing: "your splendid work with the International Federation has been of the utmost importance and this new organization, which I personally feel is of great international value, is indeed a tribute to your energy." MoMA Collections.

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**TROIS SIÈCLES D'ART**  
**AUX ARTS**  
**ÉTATS-UNIS**

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therefore provided the first opportunity for these personalities to discuss the FIAF project.<sup>33</sup> From then on Hensel was invited to take part in all the discussions. It is not clear how the German –who by then was no longer the head of the Reichsfilmarchiv, but still represented it abroad– managed to be included in the negotiations, especially at a time when international tension was at its highest (it was less than three months after the *Anschluss*). The other three partners certainly saw an opportunity to bring international legitimacy to the future organization and, after all, the Reichsfilmarchiv was a major archive with a much larger collection than the Cinémathèque or the National Film Library.

In a letter to Langlois on 1 June, Abbott confirmed in writing the initial agreement about “the creation of an International Federation of Film Archives” which they, Olwen Vaughan, and Hensel had drafted during their preliminary conversations in the last week of May.<sup>34</sup> This document stated that the registered office of the Federation would be located in Paris (a clear victory for Langlois). The Federation would consist of “film archives having for their prime object the preservation of films, the compilation of film records and if necessary the projection of films for a non-commercial purpose, either pedagogic or artistic”. If the agreement recognized the *de facto* diversity of the legal set-ups of the future member organizations (“national, semi-official and recognized private film archives”), it made it clear that the future federation would operate on a strictly non-commercial basis: “the Federation will rigorously exclude any institution or organization whatsoever making use of film for any commercial purpose whatsoever.” The protagonists also agreed that no more than two institutions would be admitted from any one country, and that each member would have to contribute an annual membership fee to the Federation. If Abbott insisted that this initial agreement was only a first draft to be improved, he nevertheless concluded optimistically: “May I add

that we heartily welcome the creation of this international organization, which we believe will greatly facilitate our mutual endeavours.”

The representatives of the four archives agreed to meet again, this time in a more official manner, to put the finishing touches to FIAF’s founding document. They reconvened in the Abbotts’ hotel in his Paris on 9 June, and then again on 15 June. The minutes of these first two official FIAF meetings, taken by Olwen Vaughan, were duly signed by the participants –Abbott, Hensel, Vaughan, Langlois, and Franju. During the first meeting they approved the international agreement for the proposed Federation. They also decided that the first annual congress would be held in New York in the summer of 1939, and (on Hensel’s insistence, for political balance) the second in Berlin in 1940. Until the New York congress, the Board of Directors would consist of Abbott (President), Hensel (Vice-President and Secretary), Vaughan (Treasurer), and Langlois, while Franju was given the post of Executive Secretary, in charge of the FIAF office (another victory for Langlois).<sup>35</sup> It was announced that the French government –thanks once again to the involvement of Yves Chataigneau, who was now in the prestigious position of Secretary General of the Prime Minister’s office– accepted to provide office accommodation in Paris and to contribute half of FIAF’s annual budget, the other half being paid by the three non-French members. During their second meeting, the four “FIAF Directors” signed the English version of the FIAF Agreement and decided that the Federation should start operating on 1 September 1938. It was also unanimously agreed that “film be exchanged metre for metre wherever possible”, and that “a copy of all publications issued by each archive be circulated to each member of the Federation”.

Between these two meetings, the representatives of the four archives also met on a less formal yet crucial occasion –a gala

33. See MoMA Press Release, 26 October 1938, MoMA Collections. Accessible at <[www.moma.org/docs/press\\_archives/462/releases/MOMA\\_1938\\_0042.pdf?2010](http://www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/462/releases/MOMA_1938_0042.pdf?2010)>

34. Letter from John Abbott to Henri Langlois, 1 June 1938, photocopied MoMA documents, FIAF Archive.

35. Langlois was curiously left without a formal position in this early set-up (which was confirmed in the official Agreement signed on 17 June). This can be explained by the fact that the Cinémathèque had already obtained the post of Executive Secretary of FIAF, and the location of the Secretariat in Paris. Hensel probably also insisted on the Reichsfilmarchiv obtaining as prestigious a position as that of its American counterpart, for obvious political reasons.

screening of American films, organized by the Cinémathèque française at the Maison Internationale of the Cité Universitaire, in honour of Iris Barry and John Abbott. The guest list was extremely impressive—ministers, writers (James Joyce, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry...), composers (Honegger, Milhaud...), artists (Georges Braque), and many friends of the Cinémathèque (Von Stroheim, Pabst, Renoir, L'Herbier, Dulac, to name but a few). In his thank-you speech, John Abbott declared that the evening was “the very first manifestation of international friendship through film”.<sup>36</sup> He added that it was the very first time a film archive programmed, from its own collections, a prestigious retrospective about another nation’s cinema. For Langlois, this first very public exposure of the fruitful partnership between film archives was a masterstroke which put him and his Cinémathèque at the centre of the international stage.

On the back of this success, a special ceremony took place at the Hotel Matignon (the residence of the French Prime Minister) on 17 June, where four copies of the FIAF Agreement were formally signed by the representatives of the four film archives, and countersigned by Laure Albin Guillot on behalf of the French government, thus sanctioning its official recognition of the Federation (and, indirectly, of the Cinémathèque française). The next step was to have the Agreement countersigned by higher authorities in the other three countries, once again for further legitimacy of the new organization. Abbott insisted that for now there be no leakage of the news of the formation of FIAF, as he thought that a lot could happen before the agreement was finally signed by all parties. In his mind, FIAF as an operational organization was still a long way off, and he could not afford to disappoint the MoMA Film Library Chairman (John Hay Whitney) and its funders (the Rockefeller Foundation) should the project eventually collapse. He offered his co-founders the option of drafting a press release, which would then be published simultaneously on the day of FIAF’s launch (now set for 1 October) by all four archives, for maximum publicity. Despite

his firm stance, a number of articles did appear in film trade papers over June and July, notably in England, where Oliver Bell, director of the BFI, decided to invite the press on 15 June to announce the imminent formation of the Federation. A month later, the new FIAF Executive Secretary Georges Franju signed a full-page article in *La Cinématographie française* praising the birth of the new organization. But overall, and to Abbott’s relief, the news was not widely relayed by the press.

From the moment the Abbotts sailed back to New York on 22 June, Olwen Vaughan started playing a key role in ensuring that the unfinished business would be dealt with, especially as “minor frictions” seemed to have appeared between Langlois and Hensel, as reported in correspondence between Abbott and Vaughan at the end of June.<sup>37</sup> She played the unofficial role of spokesperson in Europe for the Abbotts, and kept a close eye on Langlois and Hensel, whose widely different temperaments (and ideological mindset) could put the common project at risk. She regularly reported to MoMA her growing frustration at Hensel’s lack of communication, and Langlois’ vagueness and messiness. In the summer and autumn of 1938, she made numerous trips to Paris and worked relentlessly to ensure that the future FIAF office, which the French government had agreed to provide at 2 rue Montpensier (in a building which currently houses the French Conseil Constitutionnel), would be ready to start work as soon as the official FIAF announcement was made.<sup>38</sup> She also supervised the appointment of the first stenographer (Dominique Blankawitz, who would later become Mrs. Franju). Abbott fully recognized, in a letter to Vaughan, her critical contribution in that period: “Do let me say that I think your capacity for work is really the eighth wonder of this world. I am quite sure that if the Federation gets over this difficult period the credit will be all yours.”<sup>39</sup>

36. Georges Franju, “La Fédération Internationale des Cinémathèques est en formation”, *La Cinématographie française*, 15 and 22 July 1938, p.35.

37. Letter from Vaughan to Abbott, 24 June 1938, and letter from Abbott to Vaughan, 28 June 1938, MoMA Collections.

38. Interestingly, the same building also hosted the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, a branch of the League of Nations which aimed to promote international cultural and intellectual exchange between scientists, researchers, teachers, artists, and other intellectuals.

39. Letter from Abbott to Vaughan, 28 June 1938, MoMA Collections.



Henri Langlois and Georges Franju in the 1930s.

Langlois had his own strong ideas about the Federation and the role of its future Secretariat, and spent a lot of energy over the next few months trying to convert his partners to his vision,<sup>40</sup> but he did not always succeed. For instance, on numerous occasions he tried to convince Abbott, the new FIAF President, to accept his friends Luigi Comencini and Mario Ferrari of the Cineteca Milanese (the future Cineteca Italiana) as founder-members of FIAF, even though they had been unable to be present in Paris for the preliminary meetings and the formal signing of the Agreement.<sup>41</sup> But Abbott refused to bow to this, and firmly repeated in each of his letters to Langlois that the Italians would have to wait until the New York congress to become official members. The matter was made even more compli-

cated by the fact that two Italian institutions were actually asking for FIAF membership: the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (the Italian national film school, which Langlois referred to as the “the official Italians” because of its formal association with the Italian state) and the Cineteca Milanese (“the unofficial Italians”, whose activities were largely clandestine because of their opposition to the Fascist government). Langlois made no secret of his preference for the latter, but he confessed that it was in everybody’s interest to admit both into the Federation, as he argued that since 1937 London and Paris had exchanged a lot more with the Italians than with Berlin.<sup>42</sup> For now, however, his exchanges with Milan and Rome would have to remain outside the framework of the Federation.

40. See, for instance, Langlois’ letter to Abbott, 29 June 1938, MoMA Collections.

41. On Langlois’ recommendation, Comencini wrote to the FIAF Secretary General on 20 June 1938 to formally apply for FIAF membership for his Cineteca, anticipating a positive response. Letter from the MoMA Collections. The Cineteca Italiana would only be accepted as a FIAF member in July 1946.

42. Letter from Langlois to Abbott, 29 June 1938, MoMA Collections.

If Hensel and Vaughan had the copies of the Agreement countersigned by their higher authorities within a few weeks, the delay in announcing the formation of FIAF eventually came from New York, where Abbott faced his own difficulties. One of them was that the US Government was in the process of setting up a film department within the National Archives, which seemed to unsettle the MoMA Film Library's status as the country's semi-official film archive. Abbott initially assumed this new institution would have to co-sign the FIAF Agreement with MoMA, so he made a number of enquiries. On another front, a tough interview of Abbott by Will H. Hays' public relations man on 25 October also showed that the powerful Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America was rather concerned about the new Federation, and by the fact that MoMA would be exchanging films with Nazi Germany on a systematic basis.<sup>43</sup> The serious war scare caused by the Czechoslovakia *Sudetenland* crisis in late September came very close to putting an end to the FIAF Project before it was even launched. In a very anxious letter to Abbott, Vaughan recounted her presence in Paris that week, "whilst everything was at its worst. You never saw such a dreary town – all Air Raid precautions – no lights – and everyone far gloomier than in London." She reported that both Langlois' and Hensel's morale was very low, and she begged Abbott to have the FIAF Agreement signed as quickly as possible to ease the tension. The Munich Agreement (29 September) put a temporary end to the immediate risk of war, but this did not fool any of the FIAF partners. On 6 November, Langlois admitted to Barry: "we must expect new trouble no later than spring."<sup>44</sup> In another letter to Abbott written on the same day, he already chose sides: "Only the future of FIAF is important to me, so if one authority must prevail, which is eventually bound to happen in FIAF's interest, it had better be that of the United States rather than that of Germany."<sup>45</sup>

But for now, the momentary respite of October 1938 enabled Abbott to finally obtain the green light from his boss, John Hay Whitney, to organize a formal signing ceremony. On 10 October Abbott cabled his three partners to confirm that the simultaneous launch could be announced by the four archives on 25 October, and Whitney signed the Agreement on 27 October. This time the press picked up the story, and the launch of FIAF made the news in all four founding countries. Although FIAF was finally operational, nobody actually realized that the Federation had no proper legal status, since it had not been registered as an "association" at the Préfecture de Police in Paris, as was required by French law. This mistake would go unnoticed for decades, until the serious internal crisis of 1959 which split FIAF into two irreconcilable clans (in short, Langlois and a few supporters versus the rest of the FIAF community) brought this initial oversight to everyone's attention.<sup>46</sup> But that is another story.

***In the next issue: FIAF's early work from late 1938 to the war.***

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43. Transcript of the discussion between John Abbott and Ray Norr on 25 October 1938, 13 pages, MoMA Collections.

44. Letter from Langlois to Barry on 6 November 1938, translated into English (probably by Barry), photocopied MoMA documents, FIAF Archive.

45. Letter from Langlois to Abbott, 6 November 1938, photocopied MoMA documents, FIAF Archive.

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46. For more details on the 1959 crisis and its aftermath, see Christophe Dupin, "Je t'aime...", op. cit., pp. 61-63.

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OCTOBER 10 1938  
5 P M

WESTERN UNION GIFT ORDERS SOLVE THE PERPLEXING QUESTION OF WHAT TO GIVE.

Telegram from John Abbott to Henri Langlois, 10 October 1938

fr

À partir de documents historiques puisés au secrétariat de la FIAF, mais aussi dans les collections d'archives du MoMA, de la Cinémathèque française et du BFI, cet article explore les balbutiements du mouvement des archives du film, entre la création des premières cinémathèques au milieu des années 30 et la formation de la FIAF en 1938 par quatre d'entre elles – le British Film Institute, la Cinémathèque française, le MoMA et la Reichsfilmarchiv. L'auteur s'attarde tout d'abord sur les tout premiers échanges (d'information, de films et d'autres documents) entre ces nouvelles institutions, dès que leurs responsables respectifs ont réalisé l'importance de développer des liens étroits avec leurs collègues étrangers, tant pour asseoir la légitimité de leur cause commune (le sauvetage du patrimoine cinématographique mondial) que pour tirer avantage d'un partage des ressources. À ce titre, le voyage en Europe d'Iris Barry et de John Abbott, du MoMA, durant l'été 1936, représente le premier moment clé de ce projet de coopération internationale.

Le texte met ensuite en lumière l'importance particulière de la collaboration entre Henri Langlois, le jeune et fougueux Secrétaire général de la Cinémathèque française, et ses aînés américains du MoMA. Avec ces premiers échanges, viennent aussi les premières frustrations et espoirs déçus, liés par exemple au coût prohibitif de la circulation des films d'un pays à l'autre, aux ayants-droits peu coopératifs ou à la piètre qualité des rares copies disponibles.

Dans une dernière partie, l'auteur passe en revue les divers événements de l'année 1938 qui ont mené à la naissance de la FIAF, sous l'impulsion d'un Langlois qui, plus que nul autre, aura saisi l'avantage à tirer d'un tel réseau. Il sera d'ailleurs déterminant dans le choix du siège de la nouvelle organisation (situé à Paris) ainsi que de son premier secrétaire exécutif (son ami Georges Franju). Le récit nous emmène de la rencontre décisive entre les futurs fondateurs à Paris au mois de mai à l'occasion de l'exposition «Trois siècles d'art aux États-Unis», à l'annonce simultanée du lancement de la FIAF par les quatre archives le 25 octobre 1938, en passant par la signature officielle de l'acte fondateur de la Fédération le 17 juin. Le processus de formation de la FIAF s'est avéré assez long et laborieux, car outre les différences de tempérament et de vues entre les partenaires et leur éloignement géographique, c'est bien le contexte politique international exécrable – de l'Anschluss aux accords de Munich – qui a bien failli mettre en péril le projet. À la fin de l'année 1938, la FIAF peut néanmoins enfin se mettre au travail. Au détail près que personne n'a songé à l'enregistrer officiellement à la Préfecture de Paris, avec les conséquences que cela aura vingt ans plus tard lors du grand schisme interne de la FIAF de 1959-60.

Dans le prochain numéro : Les débuts de la FIAF, le premier congrès et de la fin de 1938 à la 2ème guerre mondiale.