

# FIAF Oral History: Robert Rosen – Film Culture Activist at UCLA

Christian Dimitriu

Christian Dimitriu: Honorary Member of FIAF and Member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Film Preservation* (Lausanne)

*Interviewer's note: Robert Rosen, born in 1940, is an educator, critic, preservationist, retired founding Director of the UCLA Film & Television Archive, and Dean Emeritus of the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television in Los Angeles. Our conversation took place during the 68th FIAF Congress in Beijing, China, on 23 April 2012, within the framework of the FIAF Oral History Project. I am particularly grateful that we could combine our China agenda and find the time to remember his invaluable contribution to the development of the film archive movement from such an important and, in the 1970s, virtually unique perspective of a university-based archive. The interview transcript has been edited and adapted for publication with the approval of Robert Rosen. The illustrations come from my own collection, as well as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, UCLA, and the China Film Archive.*

**Bob, it is a great surprise to meet you here, at the FIAF Congress in Beijing. I am particularly grateful that we could arrange for this conversation, which gives us the possibility to talk about FIAF's history and – maybe – define some elements to draw some conclusions about its future.**

**Let's start with some personal questions. What is your background?**

On a personal level, my activities as a professional have been shaped to a significant degree by my early life growing up in a community of political and cultural radicals, where I learned the importance of social commitment. The Francisco Ferrer Colony in central New Jersey was named for the Spanish educator and anarchist executed by the Spanish government in 1909. In the 12 years I lived there as a child, I thought it was perfectly normal that my neighbors might be anarchists, socialists, communists, or counter-cultural advocates of every type – a vitally alive setting where workers (my father was a carpenter), artists, scientists, intellectuals, teachers, writers, the gainfully employed and the willfully unemployed, respected one another and engaged in ferocious debates about politics, culture, the arts, and just about everything else. It was in this setting where I learned the values of tolerance, the importance of ideas, and the virtues of risk-taking for the collective good. These were the qualities I tried to bring to my activities as university teacher, critic, and media archivist.



Robert Rosen, Martin Scorsese, Clint Eastwood, Steven Spielberg and George Lucas discuss preservation at the 1995 FIAF Congress in Los Angeles.

### **How did you first get involved with motion picture history and criticism?**

I was trained to be a cultural and intellectual historian, and I taught both undergraduate and graduate courses at Columbia University in New York and later at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. In 1971, Stuart Samuels, a colleague at Penn, proposed that we co-teach a course on the history of the movies, the first of its kind at any history department in the country. This seemed like an absolutely crazy idea: in part because I had absolutely no formal training in the area, and in part because teaching movies at a prestigious Ivy League school would be derided by the faculty as the intellectual equivalent of a course on Scrabble, certainly not something that serious academics would even consider doing if they wanted to keep their jobs.

Well, that was precisely the attraction for two young troublemakers. We did the course, and did it big: 500 students, 25 assistants, and a double bill five days a week, with live musical accompaniment for the silents. To learn the field ourselves we engaged in non-stop viewing, reading, and thinking about the movies,

resulting in lectures that broke new ground in the field and helped to legitimate academic media studies across the country. Even more important, many of our students went on to become major innovators and leaders in the entertainment industry.

By now I had become a fervent convert to the cause of teaching and studying the movies, but had no idea where and how I could pursue it on a full-time basis. After a year of movie-viewing in France in 1974 and a contemplative trek into the Sahara, I was surprised and delighted to be invited to teach a single ten-week course at the UCLA Department of Film and Television. I never left. Understanding motion pictures and teaching filmmakers was to become my life's goal, and over the course of the next four decades I served as professor, then Department Chair, and finally for 11 years as Dean of the School.

### **How did you get into the archival specialty in L.A.?**

Again, a combination of serendipity and the goodwill of my colleagues. Howard Suber, a faculty member in film studies, had created



Martin Scorsese, Eva Orbanz, and Robert Rosen at the 1995 FIAF Congress in Los Angeles.

a study collection of about 3,000 titles so that the Ph.D. students would have original films to study. Remember, this was back in the days before the existence of videocassettes and DVDs. Many of the prints were on nitrate film stock, quite literally rescued by our students from studio loading docks where they were destined to be unceremoniously dumped in the infamous “ocean vaults” off the coast. Others were discarded by the studios as useless antiquated black-and-white movies of no commercial value, and still others came from a handful of private collectors. Although Howard referred to the holdings loosely as an archive, as yet there were no programs for preservation, no regular screenings, sub-standard vaults in downtown Los Angeles, and a single flat-bed viewer for study access by the students.

When Howard one evening plied me with alcohol and asked if I would volunteer to be interim “director” of the “archive” as a sideline to my teaching responsibilities, I demurred, pleading that I that knew absolutely nothing about archiving. His response was, “What’s to know?” My answer was, “Why not?” When the single paid employee at the time (supported with a grant that was about to run out) asked

what I was going to do about nitrate preservation, I thought he was referring to the preservatives in salami. When Bob Epstein, the volunteer curator of the collection, set me straight on the grim realities of film deterioration, and when I began to hear rumors that our throw-away nitrate prints might be of higher quality than the preservation masters at the studios, I came to take my responsibilities more seriously. I read all I could find about preservation, and listened to Epstein. I was frankly appalled by what I learned.

So, in 1975, despite a dearth of funding, a lack of organized activities, miserable storage facilities, and largely volunteer staff, I was committed that one day UCLA would become home to a world-class archive. Surely this unrealistic, even insane, optimism reflected a youth spent living with radicals.

Over the course of the next 25 years we made progress bit by bit, one difficult step at a time. Every small grant or donation was used to leverage program building in preservation, programming, and access. Every temporary position was leveraged to become permanent. Every opportunity was seized to propagandize

the importance of preservation. We were most fortunate in attracting to the cause an amazing group of fanatically dedicated individuals, including the breathtaking skills and knowledge of Bob Gitt in preservation, the imaginative risk-taking of Geoff Gilmore in public programming, the dogged commitment of Steve Ricci to access; the brilliant administrative sensibilities of Eddie Richmond; and the professionalism of Martha Yee as head cataloguer. There was also Charles Hopkins' vigilant overseeing of the vaults, Dan Einstein's forays into building the television collection, and the achievements of many others too numerous to name.

The UCLA Film & Television Archive's success in building one of the world's largest collections and in establishing top-notch programs in preservation, programming, and access was the result first and foremost of an extraordinarily dedicated staff. If I take any personal credit at all for our growth, it was in nurturing a sense of mission, determination, and common purpose. Nothing, I thought, was impossible.

**What do you consider the major accomplishments within the Archive over your 25 years as Director?**

First, there is the vast scale (currently more than half a million titles) and wide scope of the collection. From the beginning we cast the net broadly for acquisitions, convinced that the single most important criteria for selection was humility – not foreclosing the possibility for future generations to find their own importance in films that we ourselves might judge to be marginal.

Secondly, while working in the shadow of the Hollywood entertainment industry we devised policies and practices that respected the legitimate interests of the copyright proprietors who entrusted their works to our care, while at the same time serving the widest possible wide range of users who sought access to our collections.

Our commitment to the democratization of access included a full program of public screenings, a massive Archive Research and Study Center for individual viewing, an active commercial services division to support media

productions, and a policy of generous loans to sister archives and festivals around the world. We served a generation of future filmmakers at UCLA by integrating archival programming into their studies. We invented new ways to create synergies between preservation and access, notably by foregrounding our Festival of Preservation as an annual event. Our reasoning was that the most cogent case for preservation is made when audiences fall in love with stories on the big screen and come to realize emotionally and intellectually the tragedy of what might have been lost.

Third, I would point to our ongoing and intimate relationships with the creative community. Public screenings served as a forum for directors, writers, producers, actors, and the myriad artists who collaborate in the creation of motion pictures. Our study center welcomed working professionals who found fresh insights by viewing our moving image past. We worked closely with archival programs at all the major studios, learned best practices from one another, and embraced studio archivists as fellow partners in preservation.

And, finally, because we were situated in a major university, we were profoundly committed to enhancing the use of film in educating students at all levels. We provided copious screenings for future filmmakers, for young people, and their teachers. Our Research and Study Center was conceived from its inception as a place for students from every discipline, be it women's studies, Asian studies, history, anthropology, or political science. As a participant in FIAF, we advocated building bridges between archives and film schools. And because we cared so deeply about education, it made perfect sense that we would become the home to an innovative M.A. degree program in Moving Image Archive Studies.

**How did you build such a large and varied collection?**

Because we were neither the official copyright repository and we were disinclined to pay for collections, we relied mainly on our good reputation for managing and preserving collections. I would say that there were half a dozen main ways the holdings grew:





Robert Rosen and Lia van Leer at the 1998 FIAF Congress in Prague.

The first was deal-making with the producers; for example, agreeing to store and maintain studio holdings in return for the right to create preservation masters and provide controlled access. The second was to seek out holdings that for economic or other reasons were no longer of interest to the copyright holders; the 26 million feet in the Hearst Metrotone newsreel collection is a case in point. The third was to work collaboratively with film-related institutions. We established an agreement with the Directors Guild of America to deposit a mint print of every film made under Guild auspices. With Outfest, the Los Angeles gay and lesbian film festival, we established the Legacy Collection of LGBT films, which now numbers more than 20,000 items. Industry personalities and collectors with invaluable private holdings were a fourth source. Our most significant partner in preservation was David Packard, whose collections we house and preserve, and whose passion for preservation resulted in new vaults and facilities for the archive. In short, we diligently pursued every lead, however unlikely, including digging up buried nitrate film in a cornfield.

#### **Tell me about your experiences with FIAF.**

At a time before there was formal training in film archiving, my colleagues in FIAF were my teachers. From my first FIAF Congress in Mexico City in 1970, and throughout the next 25 years as archive director, I listened and learned from a score of leaders in the field too numerous to list. There was Eileen Bowser on preservation priorities, Wolfgang Klaue and yourself on the global nature of archiving, Sam Kula on selection criteria, Clyde Jeavons and Anna-Lena Wibom on the importance of technologies, Lia van Leer on educating the young, Peter Kubelka and Peter Konlechner on film as an art form, and Brigitte van der Elst on fair and competent administration. I am particularly grateful to Jan de Vaal for persuading me to turn my interim directorship into a permanent position, and, indeed grateful to the directors and staff of each and every institution around the globe who hosted FIAF congresses. They were my school, and you were my professors.

At FIAF congresses, and then as member of the Executive Committee, I viewed my own role to be, most usefully, a gadfly, sometimes challenging orthodoxies and frequently asking difficult questions. The responses were not always positive from everyone: my call for the democratization of access through the use of video was characterized as “demagogic”, my advocacy of full public disclosure of holdings as “suicidal”, and my position on behalf of commercial services and close studio relations as “incompatible” with FIAF principles. But the interchanges even at their most heated were always professional, always in a spirit of friendship, and always for the good of the archival cause. I miss them dearly.

Of course, the highpoint of the Archive’s relationship with FIAF was hosting the 1995 Congress to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the birth of cinema.

### **What is your current involvement with archiving?**

Although I am in theory retired, with the status of Dean Emeritus at UCLA, it appears that no one believes it. I’m as busy as ever.

I serve as Chair of the Archivists Advisory Council of The Film Foundation, an organization that I helped to establish with Martin Scorsese in 1990. Our concept was simple: create a board of filmmakers of the highest distinction to advocate on behalf of the cause of preserving movies. Our objectives were three: to raise money for preservation (to date more than \$25 million), to fund preservation by the archives (to date more than 500 titles), and to raise popular consciousness. I am most proud of having received in 2008 the John Huston Award for Artists Rights from the Directors Guild of America. The first right of an artist is that his or her work should survive.

I have also been an active member since its inception in 1992 of the National Film Preservation Board of the Library of Congress, which each year names 25 films to the National Film Registry. I serve on the board of numerous archival-related foundations, notably David Packard’s Stanford Theater Foundation, and in the recent past delivered public lectures on

media history in Melbourne, San Francisco, Kansas City, and New York. I also carry the flag for preservation as International Master at the Communications University of China and as a faculty member at UCLA, where I teach young filmmakers that studying the great films of the past gives you the courage to find a uniquely personal vision to create the films of the future.

### **What are your thoughts on the future of media archiving?**

The digital revolution is transforming all that we do in the areas of acquisition, preservation, restoration, access, exhibition, and production. I am extremely optimistic that in the not-too-distant future we will discover bold new solutions to the painful trade-offs we have been forced to make in the past to save our moving image heritage.

But for all of the new challenges and for all of the big changes, many of the key lessons I learned from my FIAF colleagues still apply. The first, to be skeptical about short-term technological fixes as long-term panaceas. The second, to keep our institutional mission in the foreground: the mutually supportive objectives of preservation and access. And finally, embrace moving image media in all of its diverse dimensions: as artistic expression, as cultural artifact, as ideology, and as an expression of our collective cultural memory. Technologies are clearly essential to our future, but let’s not confuse ends and means, and substitute instrumental rationality for substantive objectives.

Christian, thank you for this interview. It means a great deal to me, and I look forward to hearing from friends and colleagues.



Robert Rosen and Fu Hongxing at the 2012 FIAF Congress in Beijing.



Christian Dimitriu and Robert Rosen at the 2012 FIAF Congress in Beijing.

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Le présent texte est une version revue, corrigée et abrégée de l'interview de Robert Rosen réalisée par Christian Dimitriu dans le cadre du projet de la mémoire orale de la FIAF, lors du 68ème Congrès de la FIAF, à Beijing, en avril 2012.

Cette interview constitue un témoignage de première source sur la création et le développement de l'une des archives les plus importantes de l'univers de la FIAF à partir d'une collection originellement destinée à l'étude du cinéma dans l'université. Elle nous livre, en même temps, quelques détails de la trajectoire exceptionnelle du principal promoteur de l'institution : Robert Rosen.

Comme ce fut le cas avec d'autres directeurs de cinémathèques de sa génération, Bob Rosen n'a pas appris son métier dans les universités ou les écoles techniques, mais l'a développé à partir de son intérêt pour la culture et l'enseignement. L'enfance de Bob a été marquée par son éducation au sein de la commune libertaire « Francisco Ferrer », du nom de l'anarchiste exécuté en 1909 par le gouvernement Espagnol, dont faisait partie son grand-père paternel. Cette expérience originelle a profondément marqué son caractère de débateur dans tous les aspects de la culture, la politique, l'éducation et la vie en général, et a orienté sa trajectoire d'enseignant, de critique et de conservateur des médias.

Un concours de circonstances – plusieurs voyages et l'étude de l'histoire et la culture, en particulier françaises – a conduit Bob à enseigner l'histoire du cinéma, d'abord sur la Côte Est des États-Unis, puis à Los Angeles. Invité à donner un cours d'une semaine à l'UCLA, il est resté sur la Côte Ouest près de 40 ans. L'étude du cinéma et la formation des réalisateurs étant devenus le centre de ses intérêts, il devint professeur, puis responsable du département et finalement doyen de l'école de l'UCLA.

Au départ, le fonds de films de l'UCLA comprenait quelque 3.000 titres réunis à des fins pédagogiques, essentiellement des copies 16mm ou des copies de la distribution, parfois sur support nitrates, mises à disposition par les maisons de production. Il n'y avait pas de vidéo, ni de DVD, pas plus que des programmes de conservation. On visionnait les films sur table de montage.

Le projet d'archives complètes prit forme à partir de 1975, et Bob s'y engagea avec son savoir et sa pugnacité, tout en s'entourant des spécialistes hautement motivés et qualifiés qui – grâce à la conjugaison de leurs talents – devaient assurer la réussite de l'entreprise dans son ensemble.

Parmi les réussites de ses 25 ans de travail à la tête des archives, Bob signale, en particulier, la taille et la diversité des collections (aujourd'hui quelques 500.000 titres !) fondée sur une grande amplitude de critères de sélection. Puis, il mentionne l'équilibre entre la défense des droits des producteurs et l'accès des publics, aussi bien aux collections qu'à la documentation. Troisièmement, Bob souligne la relation étroite entretenue avec la communauté des créateurs, des artistes, et des Studios. Finalement, fidèle à sa vocation universitaire, le Département de cinéma et télévision continue d'utiliser le cinéma comme moyen d'éducation des étudiants à tous les niveaux. La création en 2002 d'un programme *post-grad* en études d'archivage de l'image en mouvement en était l'aboutissement naturel.

La richesse des collections est le résultat d'un travail permanent sur plusieurs fronts : celui des négociations avec les producteurs, celui de la recherche de collections qui n'intéressaient plus leurs propriétaires (par exemple les actualités Hearst Metrotone), sur celui de la collaboration avec les institutions qui s'occupent de cinéma et du dépôt légal, ou encore le contact permanent avec toutes sortes d'associations (des minorités sociales, etc.), celui des collectionneurs, et celui des relations avec des mécènes (tels que David Packard et de nombreuses associations).

Les relations de Bob Rosen et de l'UCLA avec la communauté de la FIAF furent décisives. Les congrès de la FIAF furent son école ; les collègues, ses professeurs. Les échanges d'idées – parfois passionnels – furent toujours placés sous le signe du professionnalisme et de l'amitié. Le point d'orgue des relations de l'UCLA et la FIAF fut le Congrès de Los Angeles, organisé en 1995 pour célébrer le centenaire de la naissance du cinéma.

En principe à la retraite, doyen émérite à l'UCLA, Robert Rosen reste toujours actif au sein de nombreuses institutions aux États-Unis et à l'étranger, toujours partagé entre la création artistique, la préservation du cinéma et l'enseignement. Quant à l'avenir des cinémathèques, il estime que la révolution numérique conduira inexorablement à la transformation de nos méthodes de travail en matière d'acquisition, conservation, restauration, accès, programmation et production, mais que les leçons apprises avec collègues de la FIAF demeurent souvent d'actualité, en particulier la consigne d'appréhender les médias de l'image en mouvement dans leur dimension globale : comme expression artistique, comme artefact culturel, comme idéologie, et comme expression de notre mémoire culturelle.

Este texto es una versión revisada, corregida y abreviada de la entrevista de Robert Rosen realizada por Christian Dimitriu en el marco del proyecto de la memoria oral de la FIAF, durante el 68º Congreso de la FIAF celebrado en Beijing en abril 2012.

Constituye un testimonio de primera fuente sobre la creación y desarrollo de uno de los archivos más importantes del universo de la FIAF a partir de una colección en sus principios destinada al estudio del cine en la universidad, y al mismo tiempo nos invita a descubrir algunos de los capítulos que ilustran la trayectoria excepcional del principal promotor de la institución: Robert Rosen.

Bob Rosen no aprendió el oficio en las universidades y escuelas técnicas, sino que lo fue forjando a partir de su interés por la cultura y la enseñanza. Su infancia fue impregnada por la educación recibida en la comuna libertaria «Francisco Ferrer», nombre del anarquista español ejecutado en 1909, y a la que perteneció su abuelo paterno. Esta experiencia forjó la capacidad de Bob al debate en todas los aspectos de la vida social, política, cultural y educativa, y orientó su trayectoria de docente de crítico y de conservador de medios de comunicación.

Un concurso de circunstancias –varios viajes y una incursión en el estudio de la historia y la cultura, en particular francesas– condujeron a Bob a enseñar la historia del cine, primero en la Costa Este de los Estados Unidos, luego en Los Angeles. Invitado a impartir un curso de una semana, hace casi 40 años, aún permanece en la Los Angeles. Con los estudios de cine y la capacitación de directores como su centro de interés, fue nombrado profesor, luego director de departamento y finalmente decano de escuela en la UCLA.

En su fase inicial, la colección de películas de la UCLA estaba integrada por unos 3,000 títulos conservados con fines pedagógicos, constituida esencialmente de reducciones de 16mm o de copias provenientes de la distribución, a veces en nitrato, facilitadas por las productoras. En esos tiempos no se disponía de videos, de DVDs, ni de programas de conservación. Se visionaban las películas en mesas de montaje.

El proyecto de un archivo completo fue tomando forma a partir de 1975, y Bob puso sus conocimientos y tesón a su servicio, rodeándose de especialistas altamente motivados y capacitados quienes –gracias a la conjugación de sus respectivos talentos– lograron asegurar el éxito del emprendimiento en su conjunto.

Entre los puntos fuertes de sus 25 años de dirección de archivos, Bob señala, en particular, la magnitud y diversidad de las colecciones (que comprenden hoy unos 500,000 títulos) resultantes de una gran amplitud de criterios de selección. Luego señala el equilibrio alcanzado en materia de protección de los intereses de los productores y del acceso a las colecciones y a la documentación. En tercer lugar, figura la relación permanente de la UCLA con la comunidad de los creadores, los artistas y las productoras. Finalmente, fiel a su vocación universitaria, el Departamento de cine y televisión insiste en la utilización del cine como medio de formación de estudiantes a todos los niveles. La creación en 2002 de un programa de posgrado de estudios de archivos de imágenes en movimiento fue el resultado lógico de esa etapa.

La riqueza de las colecciones es el resultado de un trabajo continuo llevado a cabo en varios frentes: el de las negociaciones con los productores, el de la búsqueda de colecciones que dejaron de interesar a sus propietarios (por ejemplo los noticieros Hearst Metrotone), el de la cooperación con numerosas asociaciones (de minorías sociales, etc.), el de los coleccionistas, y el de las relaciones con mecenas y sponsors (como David Packard y numerosas asociaciones).

Las relaciones de Bob Rosen y la UCLA con la comunidad de la FIAF fueron decisivas. Los congresos de la FIAF fueron su escuela; los colegas, sus profesores. Los intercambios de ideas –a veces apasionados– siempre tuvieron lugar bajo el signo del profesionalismo y la amistad. El punto culminante de las relaciones UCLA-FIAF fue el Congreso de Los Angeles, organizado en 1995 en ocasión del centenario del cine.

Teóricamente retirado, decano emérito de la UCLA, Robert Rosen sigue activo en numerosas instituciones en los Estados Unidos y en el extranjero, siempre comprometido con la creación artística, la conservación cinematográfica y la enseñanza.

En cuanto al futuro de las cinematecas, reconoce que la revolución digital conducirá inexorablemente a la modificación de nuestros métodos de trabajo en materia de adquisición, conservación, restauración, acceso, programación y producción cinematográficas, pero que numerosas enseñanzas compartidas con los colegas de la FIAF mantienen su validez, en particular la consigna de considerar los medios de imágenes en movimiento en su dimensión global: como expresión artística, como artefacto cultural, como ideología, y como expresión de nuestra memoria cultural.