

JAN TRNKA / 25. 9. 2018

# 75 years of Czech film archiving

In 2018, the National Film Archive (*Národní filmový archiv*) celebrates its 75th anniversary. In light of this, it is worth commemorating at least the most important moments in the existence of the institute taking care of the Czech and world's cultural heritage for three quarters of a century. That's why I would like to briefly summarize the circumstances surrounding the foundation of the Film Archive (*Filmový archiv*) in the 1940s, the adoption of a scientific paradigm into film archiving practice, a trend appearing in Czechoslovakia since the 1960s, and then the transformation of the memory institute into today's National Film Archive occurring at the beginning of the 1990s.

Even though the documentary value of film was recognized and the first collections were made by companies or private collectors in the Czech lands and abroad already at the early development stages of cinematography, national film archives only came into existence in the 1930s: in Sweden *Svenska Filmsamfundet*, Germany *Reichsfilmarchiv*, United States of America *The Museum of Modern Art Film Library*, France *La Cinémathèque française* and the United Kingdom *British Film Institute* and its *National Film Library*. According to the historian Penelope Houston, these were relatively different institutes with rich history, directed by people with different intentions and working methods, at the same time reflecting the national approaches to cinematography, funding and the concept of public service.[1]

In spite of different motions and initiatives occurring in the Czech lands since the 1920s, our Film Archive was only founded under the German occupation in 1943 as part of the Bohemian-Moravian Film Office (*Českomoravské filmové ústředí, ČMFÚ*).[2] The activities of the Film Archive were based on a broad concept elaborated as early as in 1935 by the versatile expert, among other things a cinematographer,

pioneer of scientific films and newsreels and promoter of film museum and archive activities, Jindřich Brichta.[3]

The four main tasks of the Film Archive included collecting, processing and storing of all documents of the development of the film industry, mainly Czech one, and using the created collections, which were meant to serve the production and education of young authors and be a source of information for research and studies.[4] In connection with the acquisition policy of the institute, it is worth mentioning that it not only focused on creating film collections, but since the beginning, it also collected written, video and audio documents, books, magazines and technical exhibits.

The after-war nationalization of cinematography, granting the state a monopoly on production, distribution and film releases, with cinematography coming under the control of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (*Komunistická strana Československa, KSČ*), was often called by the then press, in accordance with the propaganda, the main prerequisite for a „systematic“ development of film archiving. It needs to be added that in the coming years, the Film Archive was troubled by some basic problems, such as a lack of funds, personnel and space for storing the archives.

After the second world war, the memory institute first became a part of the Czechoslovak Film Institute (*Československý filmový ústav, ČSFÚ*) established as a scientific-educational institute to help increase the general level of the film industry and local production and educate the audience. However, shortly after the 1948 communist coup, the Czechoslovak Film Institute was cancelled in the context of a cultural revolution directed by the Communist Party, accompanied by several non-systematic reorganizations and attempts to redefine cultural traditions and indoctrinate the public. For the Film Archive, the next decade was marked by provisional arrangements, which mainly lead to neglecting the task of preserving the precious materials in proper climate and security conditions. Many times, the Film Archive was renamed,[5] organisationally divided, and its individual segments were assigned to different corporations, offices and their departments both in the area of cinematography and outside of the industry.

This also disturbed the relationship of the institute's employees with the foreign film archiving community and the continuity of the industry's development. As early as in 1946, the Film Archive became a member of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF). The fact that it entered the FIAF early made the Film Archive its traditional member, not having a meaningless position here as it possessed a unique collection of films in terms of quantity, containing artworks canonized by the film critics and early historians, precious rarities from the beginnings of cinematography and films considered lost. Whereas in the 1940s it actively cooperated with foreign archives, exchanging materials and practical experience, in the 1950s the contacts were significantly reduced due to domestic political events.

Film archiving was flourishing on the global level though. The number of FIAF members rose significantly, with their congresses gradually giving rise to the concept of a modern, science based film archive. Mainly under the influence of Ernest Lindgren from the British *National Film Library*, emphasis was put on the need of safe storage and precise processing of the archives, which among other things included quality repositories, regular examinations of materials, detailed catalogues and other measures or archiving tools.

According to the historian Christoph Dupin, the regular FIAF meetings were marked by heated confrontations of two different approaches to working methods and film archive priorities of two parties represented by E. Lindgren and the so far key personality of the movement, Henri Langlois from *La Cinémathèque française*. The disputes revolved around the idea that preservation as a set of methods, principles and techniques for long-term survival of the films[6] was more important than their short-term accessibility.[7] At the end of the 1950s, the influence of H. Langlois, famous for his „obsession“ with rescreening old films, was waning. He was criticized for his chaotic and intuitive working methods, and a growing group of progressive archivists adopted the scientific methods of E. Lindgren.[8]

In this sense, the Film Archive was also lagging behind the global development in the care for cultural heritage, and it could only join the trend of industry professionalization after extensive organisational, political, economic and social changes in the more liberal 1960s. However, the transformation into a scientifically organized centre was a long-term process continuing in the 1970s' period of

„normalization“ as well, the process first involving standardization and then rationalization of the working methods of collection, processing, storing and using the archives. Since 1963, when the Film Archive became part of the renewed ČSFÚ, emphasis was put on increasing the quality of cataloguing, a general inventory check of film, book and document collections was performed, rules were defined for the selection of archive materials, unsuitable repositories were repaired and rebuilt and a specialized archive hall, the Prague Ponrepo cinema, was established including regional subsidiaries.

After the fall of communism in 1989, the ČSFÚ was internally reorganized and renamed to Czech Film Institute (*Český filmový ústav*). New managers were appointed in a competitive selection procedure in which in contrast to the period of normalization, mainly expert competencies of the applicants were taken into account rather than their political profiles. At the same time, there were discussions on the future direction of the institute and on securing its place in the changeable industry of cinematography, in which the state monopoly established after the Second World War was cancelled and property was being privatized. According to a new concept of the institute, cultural, political, educational, research and editorial activities, so far developed by the ČSFÚ, i.e. the controlling entity of the Film Archive, could in no way limit activities related to complex care for the archives in the future.

Less than three years after the fall of communism, as of 01 July 1992, the state economic organisation Czech Film Institute changed its legal form to the National Film Archive, an institution receiving contributions from the state, based on the decision No. 31/1992 of the then Minister of Culture Jindřich Kabát. The decision was then confirmed by the Act of the Chamber of Deputies No. 273/1993 Coll. on Certain Conditions for Production, Distribution, and Storage of Audio-visual Products. In contrast to the former ČSFÚ, film archiving became the priority of the National Film Archive, a public non-profit organization under the Ministry of Culture. Changing the order of priorities by cancelling or subordinating the above mentioned, once prominent activities of the institute, was emphasized by the name „National Film Archive“ itself, which according to the first and long-time director Vladimír Opěla also reflected the full acknowledgement of the importance of film archiving for Czech culture, making the memory institute one of the elite organizations, such as the National Technical Museum, National Library or National Gallery.[9]

As the National Film Archive, the film archive, which always used to be part of a greater organisational entity, only now became a truly independent entity in all aspects, also having power over its funding or the extent of use of its collections. The period from the 1990s onwards has been marked not only by the foundation of centres of expertise and an intense development of film archiving activities, but also by cooperation with foreign archives on international projects and in dealing with problems related to the onset of digital technologies or preserving digital images and texts for posterity or to looking for new ways of making the cultural heritage more accessible.

### Notes:

[1] Penelope Houston, *Keepers of the Frame. The Film Archives*. London: British Film Institute 1994, s. 18.

[2] Considering the unsettled times the Film Archive was founded in, its foundation can be seen as one of the self-preservation measures of the Czech culture.

[3] The German Walter Gottfried Lohmeyer formally became the director of the National Archive. However already during the occupation, the institute was practically managed by his assistant, J. Brichta, who officially became the director of the Film Archive in 1945 and remained in the position until the beginning of the 1950s. For more information on J. Brichta, see Jaroslav Lopour, „Jindřich Brichta“. Online <<http://www.filmovyprehled.cz/cs/revue/detail/jindrich-brichta>>, (cit. 27/04/2018); or Pavel Zeman, Jindřich Brichta. *Illuminace* 10, 1998, No. 2, pp. 203–206.

[4] See Pavel Zeman, Dokumenty k vývoji českého filmového archivnictví. *Illuminace* 7, 1995, No. 1, pp. 125–173; Vít Janeček, Posunout se do extrémnějších poloh. Rozhovor s ředitelem Národního filmového archivu Vladimírem Opělou nejenom o filmové distribuci. *Cinepur* 11, 2002, No. 21, p. 24.

[5] For the sake of clarity, I don't reflect the name changes of the institute, sticking to the name Film Archive (*Národní archiv*) in this text. I would however point out that the name of this institute also used to be State Film Archive (*Státní filmový archiv*), Cinematheque (*Filmotéka*) or Czechoslovak Cinematheque (*Československá filmotéka*).

[6] Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction*. London: British Film Institute 2000, pp. 44–76.

[7] Geoffrey Nowell-Smith – Christophe Dupin (eds.), *The British Film Institute, The Government and Film Culture, 1933–2000*. Manchester – New York: Manchester University Press 2014, pp. 50–52.

[8] Ibid, p. 61.

[9] Foundation Deed, ref. no.10.623/92, signed by J. Kabát, 8/10/1992, Praha, pp. 1–2; National Film Archive Foundation Deed Amendment, sent by J. Talíř, 13/8/1996, Praha. NFA, f. Vladimír Opěla, k. Foundation deeds, regulations, directives [not processed].