

RUTH BEALE

LINDGREN & LANGLOIS:

THE ARCHIVE PARADOX

For the
event series

Public Knowledge

Cubitt

Dear Monsieur Langlois,

It is with great trepidation that I begin this correspondence, considering the stalemate we maintained towards the end of our lives. Yet, given time to consider with a philosophical view and the benefit of hindsight, I am compelled to attempt to address some of our disagreements.

We worked in the same field for 36 years, but we never became closer to each other, just further apart. Must it really have been so?¹ I always felt that deep down we shared the same thoughts, but we unfortunately did not speak the same language, that's all.²

It has occurred to me, although I confess my disapproval of your approach,

1 "We worked ... been so?", paraphrase, Ernest Lindgren, draft letter to Langlois, c. 1956

2 "I always ... that's all", Ernest Lindgren, letter to Langlois, 17 June 1959

that there is a certain paradox inherent in our field that eventually proved each man's method to be vindicated on its own merits. I wonder, given our lifelong battle with film's slow death, what revelations death has brought to you on this matter? What has the passing of time brought to bear?

Yours in anticipation,
Ernest Lindgren

Cher M. Lindgren,

I assume that by language you refer to our worldview rather than our mother tongue, as I always found you to be emphatically clear. I have decided to humour your correspondence because so many battles were lost and won your plots now simply merge with the many others.

As a boy in Turkey, they told me that Joan of Arc took Paris. Knowing my father was posted

there, when I saw Joan of Arc, I believed he was living in Joan's Paris. Told that I was wrong, I started to imagine parallel Paris's: Joan's, my father's, and so on. Hence, in my somewhat odd view, time isn't time — it is space.³

It was the urgency of the matter of saving films that troubled me so much. Others would not listen, but lack of money and bureaucracy was against us. I can tell you certainly that at the end I was tired. They killed me by exhausting me with vile administrative pettiness. I was a wounded animal bounded into a thicket. They badgered me with countless details that were unworthy of my efforts.⁴ The end came but I had more work to do, which saddens me.

*Yours,
Langlois*

3 "As a boy ... space", Henri Langlois (archive footage), *Le Fantôme d'Henri Langlois*, dir. Jacques Richard, 2004

4 "They killed ... my efforts", paraphrase, Odile Chapel, *ibid.*

My dear Langlois,

With respect, your passion was sometimes difficult to handle within the context of diplomacy. I remember at conferences that you would drown your listeners in an avalanche of impassioned French which we couldn't always understand. We couldn't interrupt you and we couldn't ask for clarification. You were almost certain of winning your point in the short term.⁵ The excessive individuality which made you a great pioneer was, on occasion, a hindrance to democracy.⁶

I appreciate the candour of your letter and sympathise with your anguish

5 "you would drown ... short term", paraphrase, Ernest Lindgren, handwritten draft letter to Langlois, 1956

6 "The excessive ... democracy", paraphrase, Ernest Lindgren, *The Langlois Affair*, internal report to the BFI Governors, c.1968

most deeply. We can only succeed to heal wounds if there is complete frankness and a determination that fundamental principals shall no longer be subordinate to matters of personality or mere expedience.⁷

The work of the National Film Library, as it was, began in an atmosphere of scepticism, suspicion and even hostility. Yet today it is accepted and respected.⁸ Might the greatest legacy be that our archives survive? After all, we preserved films for posterity, in order that they may be studied.

Kindest regards,
Lindgren

7 "complete ... expedience", Ernest Lindgren, letter to Langlois, Paris, 30 March 1946

8 "the work ... respected", paraphrase, Ernest Lindgren, 'The Work of the National Film Archive: Summary of an Address', *Journal of the Royal Society of Art*, May 1963

My dear Lindgren

What is this ‘posterity’ you speak of? It always seems to be some far-away thing — perpetually twenty years in the future. My goal was to show shadows of the living coexisting with shadows of the dead. That’s the essence of film. It supercedes time and space. It goes beyond the fourth dimension.

People flocked to the Cinémathèque to experience film past and present. We had some of the best audiences on earth in Paris.⁹ It was a concentration of excitement and enthusiasm for film that cannot ever be equaled. What a remarkable situation! Some of the earliest directors were still working but we could show at the same time a fourth or fifth film by a New Waver — a unique historic compression. It was a layer cake, each rich layer available

9 “My goal ... Paris”, paraphrase, Henri Langlois (archive footage), *Le Fantôme d’Henri Langlois*, dir. Jacques Richard, 2004

for tasting.¹⁰

In any cinema you will find cinéphiles and cinéphages. A cinéphage — a film nerd — sits in the front row and writes down the credits. If you ask him whether the film is any good, he’ll say something sharp, but that’s not the point of movies. To really look at these windows on the universe is incompatible with note-taking. To love cinema is to love life.¹¹ Lindgren, did you ever really love cinema?

HL

10 “It was ... tasting”, paraphrase, Jean Narboni, *ibid.*

11 “My goal ... dimension”, “there are ... love life”, Henri Langlois, *ibid.*

My dear Langlois,

Cinema fascinates me for its technical, artistic and educative potential. Many people, eminent artists and critics among them, believe that the purpose of art is simply to give pleasure. Others, equally expert and eminent, cannot reconcile this view with either their conscience or their experience, and maintain that all art must by definition conduce towards raising the moral tone of the persons receptive to it, and thus of society in general.¹² I would try and reconcile the two: “He will win what universal applause who blends what is improving with what is pleasing, and both delight and instruct the listener”.¹³

12 “Many people ... general”, Ernest Lindgren, *The Art of the Film*, 2nd edition, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1963

13 “He will win ... listener”, Roman poet Horace, ‘Ars Poetica’, quoted by Ernest Lindgren, *ibid.*

The National Film Library fulfilled its remit to the BFI to contribute to ‘film culture’, to help develop film appreciation. The whole value of the film art movement in Britain was that, amid all its precious highbrowism and nonsense, it helped to create and to keep alive the nucleus of an intelligent film-going public which was interested in new experiments and would support good films.¹⁴

Lindgren

My dear Lindgren,

Your anti-intellectualism amuses me. Sometimes you show yourself to be provincial and petite-bourgeois, with an ambition all

14 “The whole ... good films” Ernest Lindgren, ‘Cataloguing the National Film Library’, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1940

*the more dangerous and deceitful when it is coupled with an inferiority complex towards your superiors!*¹⁵

I believe in osmosis, not to spell things out, but to draw people in. In my museum, visitors were bathed in a series of settings that evoked the atmosphere of film in different times, radiating the aura of each era.¹⁶ It loaded them with questions, sparking the urge to dig deeper. It made them want to see movies.¹⁷

When I first started collecting these things I was criticised — ‘fetishistic idiocy’ — but my aim was to create an atmosphere,

15 “you show ... superiors!”, paraphrase, Henri Langlois, quoted in Laurent Mannoni, *Histoire de la Cinémathèque Française*, 2006

16 “I believe in osmosis”, “visitors ... each era”, Henri Langlois (archive footage), *Le Fantôme d’Henri Langlois*, dir. Jacques Richard, 2004

17 “It loaded ... see movies”, paraphrase, Glenn Myrent, *ibid.*

*transmit a feeling. We are the matchmakers of illusion.*¹⁸

*Yours,
Langlois*

Dear Langlois,

I’m sorry that you should have thought it necessary to address me in such a disagreeable fashion. Is it really essential? What does it achieve? Is there no personal friendship between us, no foundation for mutual trust, in which you feel you can place any confidence?¹⁹ I have no animosity against you of any kind. In a way, it would be easier if I had. On the

18 “When I first ... illusion”, excerpt, Henri Langlois, *ibid.*

19 “I’m sorry ... confidence”, Ernest Lindgren, letter to Langlois, 5 July 1948

contrary, I like you and admire you for many things.²⁰

I will admit that we have very different temperaments. Though the arts interest me, I am blessed with a scientific mind that was able to nurture and celebrate the innovation that went on in our archive and laboratories, and I am proud of the great strides my staff and I made. Until the NFL began to evolve its own preservation and cataloguing methods virtually nothing had been done in this field.²¹

Yours sincerely,
Lindgren

20 “I have no ... many things”, paraphrase, Ernest Lindgren, letter to Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes, 2 February 1960

21 “Until the NFL ... this field”, paraphrase, Ernest Lindgren, ‘The Work of the National Film Archive: Summary of an Address’ *Journal of the Royal Society of the Arts*, May 1963

Mon cher Lindgren,

I have the feeling that you see traps everywhere.²² I am better acquainted than you think with the battles and desperate situations in which you found yourself.²³

Do not take what I say to heart. As I recall, the British government ministers, as in France, floundered to describe the purpose of film, the trade, film’s place in the ‘national life’²⁴ but you plugged away at your archive. Despite all your pedantics, I thought very highly of you.

For film there is no stasis, no absolute suspension of decay, so time was always at our heels.

22 “I have ... everywhere”, Henri Langlois, handwritten note on letter to Lindgren, date unknown

23 “I am better ... yourself”, paraphrase, Henri Langlois, letter to Lindgren, 9 October 1947

24 *The Film in National Life*, Commission of Educational and Cultural Films, 1932

*People who look ahead are very rare.
Most people look into the past. We walk
backwards, we back our way through life, we
move forwards while always looking backwards.
People who envision their future and move
toward it, peering ahead, are incredibly rare.*²⁵

*Yours,
HL*

My dear Langlois,

It is my belief that we lived through an age of new development in communication comparable in importance to the birth of language and the discovery of writing: from the invention of photography in the 1830s,

25 “People who look ... incredibly rare”, Henri Langlois (archive footage), *Le Fantôme d’Henri Langlois*, dir. Jacques Richard, 2004

to the telephone, gramophone, silent films, radio, sound film and television.²⁶ To share this history was our pleasure and our greatest challenge.

Cinematograph film was and is one of the most fragile and evanescent of recording materials.²⁷ In order to see the Portland Vase one must visit the British Museum, but in the case of a film it can be seen in any auditorium. Yet it is not the actual film copy which is of interest to the student, but that which he sees upon the screen. So the original is only precious as a means to preserve the best possible images.

As you know, I consider it an integral part of the preservation technique that the

26 “It is my ... television”, paraphrase, Ernest Lindgren, ‘The Work of the National Film Archive: Summary of an Address’ *Journal of the Royal Society of the Arts*, May 1963

27 “Cinematograph film ... television”, *A Plan for the Development of the National Film Library*, June 1947 (probably written by Ernest Lindgren)

original print should never be subjected to the wear and tear of projection, but should be used simply for the making of projection duplicates.²⁸

Lindgren

Cher Lindgren

I think it is best that I give you frankly my personal opinion.²⁹ You had films of primary importance entombed in your archives for want of copying.³⁰ Films dying in their cans... I was forever frustrated with your re-

28 "In order ... duplicates", extracts from *A Plan for the Development of the National Film Library*, June 1947 (probably written by Ernest Lindgren)

29 Henri Langlois, letter to Lindgren, 14 June 1948

30 "you had films ... copying", paraphrase, Henri Langlois, letter to Lindgren, 9 October 1947

fusal to show them. The moment of projection is the moment of life!

*Bien à vous,
HL*

My dear Langlois,

My natural caution leads me to think it is always better to say "no" and then if later you can turn it into "yes" everybody is delighted. But if you begin by saying "yes" and then afterwards have to say "no", everybody will be bitterly disappointed and blame you for upsetting their plans.³¹

Surely our dilemma is encapsulated by the fact neither you or I had the means to collect or store all the films in existence, or

31 "it is always ... their plans", paraphrase, Ernest Lindgren, memo to Kathleen Richardson, 18 April 1969

to copy and distribute those we did have. To preserve everything is a curse to posterity.³² Careful selection is therefore the first vital step in any preservation programme. It keeps the preservation problem within reasonable bounds and gives a guarantee that the money required for it (in our case, public money) is being spent on films which justify it and will continue to justify it.³³ Who are we serving after all? The government, the public or ourselves? Ultimately we are trusted by others to carry out this crucial work.

Yours,
Ernest

32 “To preserve ... posterity”, Paolo Cherchi Usai, ‘The Lindgren Manifesto’ (named after Ernest Lindgren) for the Lindgren Memorial Lecture, 2010

33 “Careful selection ... justify it”, Ernest Lindgren, ‘Selecting for Posterity’, *Journal of the Society of Film and Television Arts*, no. 39, Spring 1970

My dear Lindgren,

I do not serve the bureaucrats, and I say this categorically — one must save everything and buy everything. When I started out I was like everybody else, full of silly prejudices. I missed out on incredible things. Salome with Theda Bara was for sale. I thought ‘Fox, Theda Bara, American spectacle... who needs it?’ Now the film is lost forever. From that point on, through trial and error, I saw that people, intent on judging, who think they have taste, me included, are idiots. Never assume you know what’s of value.³⁴

Our idea of what is good and what is bad changes with every generation; we can never be sure — so when in doubt, preserve.³⁵

Langlois

34 “one must ... of value”, Henri Langlois (archive footage), *Le Fantôme d’Henri Langlois*, dir. Jacques Richard, 2004

35 “Our idea ... preserve”, Richard Roud describing Langlois’ approach, ‘A Langlois unto himself’, *The Guardian*, 23 February 1968

My dear Langlois,

I chose to keep what I could, as best I could “in perpetuity in the national interest”.³⁶

I fear that your quandary stems from the fact that at heart you are not so much an archivist as a private collector, and I say this sincerely, undoubtedly the greatest private collector of films to date, and probably of all time. Yet you exercised all the powers of a private collector (including extreme secrecy about the contents of the collection) whilst at the same time receiving considerable annual government grants without any real responsibility to account for their expenditure. The Cinémathèque was ambiguously poised between being a state institution and the personal property of its creator and Director. This was bound to

36 “in perpetuity ... national interest”, *A Plan for the Development of the National Film Library*, June 1947

create a split sooner or later.³⁷

I heard it said that you are not really disorganised — what others called disorder made perfect sense to you.³⁸ But unless material is properly catalogued and indexed it can hardly be described as a library, it is simply a massive film dump in which nothing can be found!³⁹

Yours in good faith,

EL

37 “you exercised ... or later”, paraphrase, Ernest Lindgren, *The Langlois Affair*, internal report to the BFI Governors, c.1968

38 “not really ... sense to you”, paraphrase, Ambroise Rous, *Le Fantôme d’Henri Langlois*, dir. Jacques Richard, 2004

39 “unless ... be found”, *A Plan for the Development of the National Film Library*, June 1947 (probably written by Ernest Lindgren)

Dear Lindgren,

I am disappointed that you are drawn once again into these accusations of disorder which were purely political. You say I had funding, but there was never enough. We did what we could when we could, but there was so much work to do. We have centuries to make cards!⁴⁰

Did you know? A large proportion of my stock was illicit! I couldn't make them available to just anyone. I hunted down films. I begged borrowed and stole. Whenever prints were found in an attic, a cellar, a fairground, I would be notified before they were destroyed. I kept someone on call to rush and fetch them. A new load of film cans would arrive and could remain for a week or a month in the Cinémathèque's lobby or an office or hallway.

40 "we have ... cards", Henri Langlois, quoted by Raymond Borde, *Les Cinémathèques*, L'Age d'Homme, 1983

When visitors came who were unfamiliar with our mindset, they saw stacks of rusting cans — but those weren't the Cinémathèque's holdings! It was rescued stock! I was surrounded by rusty cans because I was committed to saving films.⁴¹

Langlois

My dear Langlois,

Errors do not create themselves, they are made by men.⁴² The fires in your archives were painful to us all. Many films were lost, and this may have been prevented. It was difficult for me and others to accept your complacency in this area as it prevented

41 "A large ... saving films" paraphrase, Jean-Michel Arnold, *Le Fantôme d'Henri Langlois*, dir. Jacques Richard, 2004

42 "Errors ... by men", Ernest Lindgren, *The Langlois Affair*, internal report to the BFI Governors, c.1968

others from sharing these films.

We both died before our time and never had an opportunity to define ourselves beyond our work. This I can accept, but I would question the careful and logical being painted as dreary, and the reckless as colourful. When describing the chaos of your archive, one journalist contrasted it with mine, which he labeled “meticulously catalogued and preserved in the most stringent scientific modern conditions”.⁴³ I fear this was a reproach more than a compliment.

Ernest

⁴³ John Russell-Taylor, ‘L’affaire Langlois’, *The Times Saturday Review*, 24 February 1968

Mon cher Ernest,

I was the Cinémathèque and the Cinémathèque was me, that is it.

Everything we need we find in cinema. Like documentary and fantasy we are two sides of the same coin. Lumière plonked down his camera in the street, captured life and spat it back. The people you see in his films are like us — as they walk, we walk, and the audience is with them. You can call it reportage, but it’s much smarter than that. These films live and breathe — it’s real life. Méliès saw a different range of possibilities in the cinema, the potential to tap into his dreams and imagination. He conjured incredible visual feats: appearances, disappearances, transformations, butterflies that turned into women, women that leapt from chairs and became dragons, dragons who turned into women. Méliès was non-stop women! He married often, had countless mistresses,

*but died poor — the fate of all who pursue something out of love.*⁴⁴

Henri

My dear Henri,

You are truly more of a poet than an administrator. Now I have all feelings at once. I am full of admiration and at the same time anger and forgiveness.

Do you remember after our crucial meeting one Sunday in 1960, when you refused to shake hands with me when we parted? I have reason to suspect you regretted it afterwards.⁴⁵ Politics, someone

44 “For me ... out of love”, Henri Langlois (archive footage), *Le Fantôme d’Henri Langlois*, dir. Jacques Richard, 2004

45 “our crucial ... afterwards”, paraphrase, Ernest Lindgren, letter to Jerzy Toeplatz regarding Langlois, 4 February 1960

said, is the art of compromise and in a compromise something has to be given away. No solution is perfect, and in political negotiations none can be so.

Regret, however, need not dim hope.⁴⁶ Life is like a film: the picture is constantly changing. If the present shot is not satisfactory, we always have the chance to re-shoot what is to come.⁴⁷

Yours,
Ernest

46 “Regret ... dim hope”, Ernest Lindgren, ‘Nostalgia’, *Sight & Sound* no. 35, Autumn 1940

47 “Politics ... is to come”, paraphrase, Ernest Lindgren, letter to Einar Lauritzen, 18 February 1964

This text is a work of fiction by Ruth Beale and is constructed from original writing as well as quotations and excerpts paraphrased from their original context.

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