

Marie Barešová

## Active Archive

*An Interview with Michael Loebenstein*

**Michael Loebenstein** is the director of the Austrian Film Museum (Österreichisches Film-museum). Previously, he held the post of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA) for six years. He is currently serving his second term as Secretary General of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAPF). He also worked at the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute in its historical research cluster, as well as an advisor to the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture. In his research and curatorial activities, he mostly dealt with documentary film, the Holocaust, and visual history. He has published texts about Dziga Vertov, Peter Tscherkassky, Gustav Deutsch, and other filmmakers. Together with Paolo Cherchi Usai, David Francis and Alexander Horwath, he co-edited *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums and the Digital Marketplace* (Vienna, 2008).

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*You worked as a director of the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia and now you are in charge of the Austrian Film Museum. Could you compare these two experiences?*

They are very different institutions. The National Film and Sound Archive of Australia is a governmental institution, and it has a legislative mandate for collecting, preserving and making film accessible. It was also a big organisation with offices at four locations and about 220 employees. The Austrian Film Museum is a charitable non-profit organisation that operates on annual funding. It does receive governmental funding, but it does not report to the government. Its money also comes from sponsors and memberships. It is also much smaller in terms of staff. There are around 40 people working there. More importantly, it is a museum, whose founders wanted to build a place for researching and presenting. So, obviously its purpose and philosophy, if you like, differ from that of an archival institution.

The biggest difference for me was the contrast between the vision and the cultural mission as well as the actual processes. The most important thing for the archive is safeguar-

ding and preserving its collections, the Australian national production foremost. When you try to gather and capture everything that is produced by such a big country, it is a huge task. There is no division in terms of quality, for example. The National Film and Sound Archive of Australia is supposed to collect every single publicly produced film and sound recording. There was a curatorial team that would try to understand what happens in audiovisual culture, and they would try to choose a representative sample of its overall production. The archive obviously participates in a broad variety of activities, but its core interest was and will be the Australian national cinema: what was made by Australians in Australia and seen by Australians.

The Austrian Film Museum on the other hand had from the beginning its curatorial vision and focus on examples from world cinema that represent the essence and nature of film as a document as well as film as a work of art. Also, influenced by the museum founder's strict vision, it always had a strong focus on independent, avant-garde and art cinema. However, they also collected examples of "industrial" filmmaking to demonstrate how certain techniques, viewpoints of cinematic devices, operated throughout history. Our library was founded later on. It is now the largest film-related library in Austria, and the museum started to collect non-filmic materials, documents and photographs. The traditional focus on art cinema also shifted a bit towards popular and contemporary cinema. The research and scholarship department was built over the course of the past twenty years to enable research within the museum's collections and educational activities.

My personal experience very much derives from the cultural basis. A governmental institution obviously differs from a small non-profit organisation. It was a very interesting experience, because you do learn about responsibility and accountability. Everything you do needs to be 100% transparent, and you also need to be constantly aware that you are spending taxpayers' money rightfully in the interest of the government and people. That teaches you a lot of humility and also about how democracy works. On the other hand, for my nature being originally a curator and scholarly researcher, the constraints and all processes associated make it very hard to act spontaneously, be creative and daring. Working in a museum context is thus more suitable to my interests. However, learning about the obligations in public administration helped to be more responsible as a curator. My personal decision after having experience with both worlds was that I feel much more at home within the context of research and curation working in a smaller organisation with a less hierarchical structure.

Australians tend to put down their culture, stating that they are some second-rate colony with no history. That is absolutely not true. The culture is extremely interesting. Not only the aboriginal heritage, but also what was happening in the past hundred years. Paying attention to all this was a fantastic experience. Learning about the responsibility towards the public, no matter whether you work in an archive, museum or library, combined with the philosophy of FIAF, really helps me.

*Since you have already mentioned FIAF, how would you describe, from your position of Secretary General, the contemporary state or future of the association?*

I think that FIAF is in a really good state at the moment. The past couple of years has seen FIAF gain a very strong membership, and our financial situation improved after the

financial crisis. FIAF was thus able to support and encourage projects — in terms of publications, for instance, the cataloguing manual, but also in the area of training, outreach and knowledge-sharing. FIAF is not only an active member, but also really one of the driving factors in CCAAA — The Coordinating Council of Audio-visual Archives — and an “umbrella” for various professional associations. It has also increasingly sponsored substantial training initiatives over the course of past two years. Beyond FIAF Summer School, which is known and has been appreciated for a long time, there have also been workshops and seminars in the Balkans, in Eastern Europe, Western Europe, India, Sri Lanka as well as in South East Asia. This global scope demonstrates the importance of FIAF as not only a European- or North American-based organisation. Members of traditional institutions such as NFA or BFI sit next to representatives of very small or recently opened institutions. This plurality and diversity makes it very rich and of course also very hard. You have many individual voices, and it is not necessarily centralised.

*What are the major tasks for FIAF in the nearest future?*

I think the core challenges for the organisations are what we do globally to raise awareness. That is very difficult, because the importance of film heritage and its safeguarding and preserving is globally still underestimated. How can you create global advocacy and awareness when all of the national contexts are always so different, and lobbying as well as final decisions always happen on the national level? The key question thus is: what do you do on the international level? The other task is to be an active participant in communication and knowledge exchange as well as encouraging the development in the field of helping archives to find sustainable solutions leading towards long-term archiving of film. Best practice is shown through safeguarding motion pictures as the analogue format. If the government wants to know what needs to be done to guarantee safeguarding and safekeeping of films, they have someone to contact who can confirm that the procedures taken are the right ones. The next step is that we need to do that for long-term digital archiving. There is a real danger of a divide between big governmental and relatively wealthy organisations that establish very costly, complex digital long-term systems of preservation on one side. Then there is the majority of organisations that do not know what skills they need, do not have access to the technology, or have very little funds to put towards digital preservation. This is where there is a huge opportunity for collaboration between archives where FIAF can be not of essential service, but more of a communicator or mediator. Small or medium-size archives can then actually enter the process of co-development of applications based on open standards and open-source software. That was one of the achievements of the Prague congress. This process of sharing and deep professional obligation: how can I make my knowledge available to you, to help you learn as well as to learn from you. This opportunity is given to us by the international network.

It is also important to note that we should no longer be raising the question whether we should or should not go digital, because we already have a digital collection. Now the question is: what can we do to approach this with same standards as we did our analogue collections? Communication through FIAF is again the solution. We can figure out, among various world archives, if there actually is an affordable and sustainable solution that will enable even organisations with little money to reach this goal. The General As-

sembly during the last congress thus also approved an internship programme that will allow international mobility. FIAF can again function as a mediator. Some institutions will offer placement for an intern, whereas others will seek one. This is again to encourage collaboration and sharing. This is the main advantage and main challenge at the same time. There is still a lack of awareness and lack of support globally for film as cultural heritage. There is an urge and need to find sustainable ways of ensuring long-term digital preservation. There is also a care and communication around maintaining a culture of motion picture films and film as a medium. FIAF can again have the ability to be a place which will enable the exchange for archives that are committed to screening actual film and willing to lend prints to other archives.

*You co-presented the I-Media Cities Project during the Prague symposium. Could you explain what the project is about?*

This project, financed by Horizon 2020, is a collaboration between archives, research institutions and technology providers with the aim of creating a shared online repository of mostly public domain films: unpublished, rare and historical films shot in and about nine European cities. The purpose of this repository is not only to share digital copies of these films, but also to facilitate cooperation with researchers from a digital humanities background and various fields such as urban, historical, film or media studies to develop tools for the actual analysing of these materials. The outcome will be a web site where researchers, scholars, teachers and also the general public will be able not only to watch these films but also be presented with rich annotations and metadata for these films. Through the tools that enable shot-by-shot databasing of all of those films, you will be able to see the collections and to create links and comparisons between different shows from different times and places. It will greatly advance the way we employ existing open standards, such as filmographic metadata, but also tools available for automated content analysis. It will apply them to historical materials, which is very rarely done. I think that this will be a very fascinating opportunity.

*What would you consider crucial in the relation between cities and media?*

Modern cities as we know them and audiovisual media were practically born at the same time. The speed, movement, density and certain characteristics of modern cities, their diversity, mobility and technology, have from the beginning related to the cinematograph. The cinematograph actually captures movement, and it is in its nature a time and space machine, allowing you through editing to “leap” from one place to another. Thus, it reflects the lesson learnt from the modern city and its mobility and transport. The cinematograph is also like a training ground preparing the population that used to be largely rural for city life and modernity. It allows you to learn about radical or rapid changes. Major cities were from the beginning accompanied by Lumière’s cinematograph. So, for me, the core of the project goes back to three films that the Lumières shot in Vienna. It is a fascinating idea that Vienna was about to reach its peak as a central European metropolis at this time. It was in terms of population even bigger than it is now. It was marked by incredible density of life in the streets. It was largely pedestrianised, without automobiles, but three times more tram lines would exist than now, steam drive trams, horse carts, bi-

cycles... All those things that you can see in those early images are astonishing. This is where digital humanities become so interesting. Film can be seen, and it is often seen as pure evidence. But I am as much interested not only in what film captures, but also how it presents a particular view on reality: what is visible and what is invisible, what are the filmic devices, what is societal and ideological. Given that framework is as important as what was actually filmed. Interdisciplinary research such as the one we do at the film museum, but what is also enabled by I-Media Cities, allows you to describe and discuss all these various aspects. I am honestly endlessly fascinated.

*What is the connection between I-Media Cities and Film Stadt Wien, the project you conducted before?*

In 2010 when Film Stadt Wien ended, we all thought that the next step would be a European project, a comparison of European cities. But I moved to Australia. I-Media Cities originated in La Cinémathèque royale de Belgique. My team was first approached and offered to join the project in 2015. I was coincidentally in Vienna at that time, but still working in Australia. When I learnt about this new project, I immediately realised that this was much broader and more advanced than Film Stadt Wien. Looking back, I have become much more critical of which films to actually pick from your collection. The perspective we had in Film Stadt Wien was filtered through three different experiences. If you want a mainstream German-speaking and ethnic German middle class view, then you get a fair share of progressive leftist experimental or political dissent filmmaking from the 1930s and then particularly the 1960s and 1970s, and then a part of Jewish interwar period going up to 1938 or 1939 when Jewish Austrians were expelled or had to escape. So that is a Jewish minority perspective. What is lacking is a gendered view, for instance. There is a lack of women's views in those films. Is it because women had limited access to the film medium at that stage, or have we not looked into our collections well enough? Another problem is that between 1900 and 1918 a quarter of the Vienna population was by ethnicity and by language Czech. There is no trace of that in our collection. The diversity of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is not shown in films. Thus, the films actually give a false impression unless you contextualize it. From the 1960s onwards, Vienna was also largely influenced by immigration from what was then Yugoslavia. Again, in all of the films, there is not a single migrant's perspective. My experience in Australia has inspired me, because it is very much a country of immigrants, to go back to our collections and start looking harder as well as ask ourselves how it is possible that the film museum has not actually received any films that were shot by non-German speakers. The reason is that the museum never actually looked for them. They do exist. There is another project, "Am Rand der Stadt", which translates roughly at "On the margins of the city". In this collaboration with artists Deutsch & Schimek, we do actively look, contextualize and digitise films made not by people representing middle class life in the centre, but people who live at the margins of the city in its suburban districts or who represent minorities. Pointing out the difference between centre and periphery, mainstream and marginal, is one of the things that I-Media Cities enabled in the last year or so.