

## TO COLLECT OR NOT TO COLLECT: CINEMA'S EXISTENTIAL DILEMMA?

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### *Introduction*

Cinema has inspired the most surprising archaeological “excavation”, a disinterring of strata and strata of inventions and objects that now make up its history. And like in all archaeological excavations most of what turned up was collected, interpreted and sometimes organised. Archaeology and collecting go hand in hand and unsurprisingly in recent years, much attention has been paid to both. This has also turned our critical attention to the individuals who we call wrongly in my view “pioneers”<sup>1</sup> that have spent their entire lives collecting cinema-related artefacts, from the films themselves to everything surrounding their viewing. Cinema would not quite be the same without them and despite the obstacles, and there was many, some of which I will mention below, these “dogged” collectors have gone on to create astonishing “temples” dedicated to the seventh art.

There are however two important differences with collecting antiquities, the first is that collectors of cinema come in many different guises and the collector can be also the creator of the objects, e.g. the filmmaker. The other difference is that the “legitimacy” accorded to antiquities and more traditional plastic arts objects has not been accorded to cinema quite in the same way and even today, and despite the mammoth efforts by all involved with cinema culture, from collectors to museum curators, from cinephiles to scholars, there remains scepticism about its cultural worth. Even the pronouncements by UNESCO on more than one occasion, not to mention FIAF’s historical efforts, about the safeguarding and preservation of cinematic heritage, have not merited the same economic support from nation-states. The commercial nature of some of the film industry has determined that cinema should look after its own heritage, but not all cinema is commercial.

This is undoubtedly happening in the many examples of filmmakers who are doing just that, principally in the United States. But are these particular individual efforts really looking after cinema heritage or rather just the cinematic legacies of the “auteurs” themselves? This is what partly prompted the provocative title “to collect or not to collect” of this paper, but not only. The other key element that is intrinsic to film craft is precisely its ‘moving essence’, an ontological status which has prompted divergent views about what we understand cinema to be. Past examples have seen tensions surface at times between

<sup>1</sup> This term carries such negative connotations that I think undermines the creative and positive qualities associated with early collectors of cinema.

filmmakers' view of their craft and the collectors' view as I will show in one of the two examples below, the conflict that rose between Henri Langlois, the then Cinémathèque Française's director and curator and the filmmaker François Truffaut. At the same time, the other example discussed, that of Bill Douglas, also proves that the collector and the filmmaker can co-exist without provoking an existential crisis for either the making of films or collecting everything that surrounds it.

### *Filmmakers as collectors of themselves*

Filmmakers who are collectors are not a new phenomenon, it could be argued that the very earliest collection belonged to a practitioner, photographer and cinematographer, Boleslaw Matuszewski; closer to our times in 1978 the filmmaker Andrzej Wajda directed a documentary entitled *Welcome Inside*, ostensibly about a collector of Polish folk art, Ludwig Zimmerer, but according to Anna Krakus<sup>2</sup>, also really to explore his own collecting self. The film explores the psychological motives but also move beyond them precisely to explore their shared "pathology". She makes the general point that we should not look at collecting «as a product of neurosis...[but] read it as a productive and compensatory method for curing addictions»<sup>3</sup>. Paradoxically, this statement and her interpretation still consider collecting as a kind of pathological mental state in the way it describes it as a compensation for addiction, albeit a productive one! What the addiction may be, or what generated it, it is not spelt out.

Wajda collected everything that related to his person and his filmmaking, he built up a huge archive, but rightly Krakus argues that although he was doing the collecting, this was already what belonged to him, and in addition, it was his archivist, Mateusz Matysiak, who was doing the cataloguing and organising. Hence her argument that we need to extend the meaning of collecting beyond the questions of acquisition: «If we treat Wajda's archive as a collection, we must go beyond the conventional definition of procuring and organizing. Instead, we must add the concept of collecting as process of keeping what is already yours»<sup>4</sup>.

Another filmmaker who kept what belonged to him already was Stanley Kubrick; he also amassed a huge archive about his work, now donated to the University of the Arts London, and like Wajda's, although the collection was initiated by himself, it has since his death been added to, catalogued, and organised by archivists, and according to James Fenwick very much under the control of the Kubrick family<sup>5</sup>. In his study of the Stanley Kubrick Archive, however, Fenwick is trying to critically reinterpret the concept of the "individual

2 A. Krakus, *Compulsive collectors. Welcome inside the collections of Andrzej Wajda and Ludwig Zimmerer*, "Journal of the History of Collections", vol. 33, n. 1, 2021, pp. 129-140.

3 Ivi, p. 129.

4 Ivi, p. 130.

5 J. Fenwick, *Archive Histories. An Archaeology of the Stanley Kubrick Archive*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 2024, p. 6.

collector”, the filmmaker genius and his mythical archive, to the point where even the boxes that contains it are considered mythical because designed by Kubrick himself<sup>6</sup>. Instead he suggests that the archive needs to be looked at more in terms of what does not belong to him rather than what does, thus moving away from the autobiographical narrative: «The very name of the archive ascribed meaning, power, and value to Kubrick himself and in the process marginalised and even silenced other voices and histories»<sup>7</sup>.

### *Bill Douglas: collecting cinema ephemera*

The two examples abovementioned are very different from the kind of collector of cinema Bill Douglas was, although they certainly point towards the divergent ways in which collectors and collections can be interpreted, archived or musealised. Bill Douglas was a Scottish filmmaker who is known for four films, the Trilogy composed of *My Childhood*, *My Ain Folk* and *My Way Home*, three shorter films that have been considered partly autobiographical and a fourth, *Comrade*, a full feature length film based on the story of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, early English trade unionists who were prosecuted and transported to Australia. These films, although well received at the time, seemed not to have gained the kind of standing they deserved either from the public or the cinematic world. According to John Caughie, Bill Douglas did not also receive «academic canonisation and the mixed blessing of becoming a good teaching text»<sup>8</sup>.

Paradoxically, Bill Douglas has achieved far more recognition as a collector since his death and the establishment of The Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, which stands as testimony to him as both a filmmaker and collector. Bill Douglas died prematurely in 1991 at the age of 57. The collection was acquired in 1994, and the museum opened its doors three years later<sup>9</sup>. The museum holds the original collection of Bill Douglas and Peter Jewell, it is both a public museum as well as a university research centre, it is ensconced in the University of Exeter campus, but really only fifteen minutes from the city centre on foot.

It is a quite a unique film museum – as previous attempts to establish a dedicated museum to the moving image in the UK have fallen by the wayside, or have spectacularly failed as in the case of the London Museum of the Moving Image<sup>10</sup>. There is a Media Museum in the north of England, in Bradford but this has, over the years, dedicated more resources to photography, television and digital media (computer gaming) and to film festivals and

6 Ivi, p. 10.

7 Ivi, p. 11.

8 J. Caughie, *Don't Mourn – Analyse: Reviewing the Trilogy*, in E. Dick, A. Noble, D. Petrie (a cura di), *Bill Douglas. A Lanternist's Account*, BFI Publishing, London 1993.

9 P. Wickham, H. Hanson, *Living Film Histories: Researching at the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum*, “Journal of British Cinema and Television”, vol. 19, n. 4, 2022, pp. 554-573.

10 L. Blakemore, *A Public Showcase for the BFI: The Museum of the Moving Image*, in G. Nowell-Smith, C. Dupin (a cura di), *The British Film Institute, the Government and Film Culture, 1933–2000*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2012.

screening (the museum holds the first Imax in the country) but not towards the exhibitions of cinema's artefacts<sup>11</sup>.

The theme of loss of pre-cinema artefacts is very much at the heart of the Douglas and Jewell collection (now further enriched by many other donors). According to the museum director and curator, Phil Wickham, pre-cinema artefacts, for example panoramas have not survived but souvenirs sold in connection with them are nonetheless capable of giving us an insight into the visual culture that precedes film:

The museum holds the UK's leading collection of ephemera and sources on the panorama entertainments that were popular from the 1790s onwards. The panoramas themselves – enormous 360-degree canvases that would have regularly been repainted with new scenes – hardly ever survive, but what endure are guides and keys to the panoramas: souvenirs that would have been sold at the shows<sup>12</sup>.

Calling on Raymond Williams' original ideas about "lived culture" and the way it provides a "structure of feelings", Wickham argues that «ephemera makes sense to people, creating an understanding of why cinema has been (and hopefully continues to be) so important...»<sup>13</sup>. Undoubtedly the Bill Douglas collection can become «an act of recovery»<sup>14</sup>, but unlike Langlois, who has been written about extensively there is not a lot of evidence about Douglas' motivation for his collecting activities, and unlike Wajda and Kubrick, we know he was not collecting himself, that indirectly, he had put in his trilogy. However, this absence of evidence, was partially fulfilled by his lifelong companion and friend and co-collector Peter Jewell in his writings and more recently in a documentary about their friendship<sup>15</sup>.

In an article published in 2008, in the journal *Film History*, ostensibly about a mere section of their collection, the artefacts on Film Fiction, Jewell begins the article by providing a disclaimer which is illuminating: «The late Bill Douglas and I were collectors, not scholars; although inevitably, over a long period of time, we acquired what we called "idiot-knowledge"»<sup>16</sup>. The playful and cheerful way in which Jewell describes what became a very rich, knowledgeable and extensive collection that spanned from the archaeology of cinema to a vast range of film-related popular ephemera is a reminder of the other side of the collector; it does not have to be a pathologically inspired activity.

We also learned more about their collection and love of cinema through the symposium held in Douglas' honour on the 23 September 2011, which covered both his filmmaking and collecting. A report by Newland on all the talks of the day was published the following

11 D. Robinson, *Film Museums I Have Known and (Sometimes) Loved*, "Film History", vol. 18, n. 3, pp. 237–260.

12 P. Wickham, H. Hanson, *Living Film Histories: Researching at the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum*, cit., p. 558.

13 P. Wickham, *Scrapbooks, soap dishes and screen dreams: ephemera, everyday life and cinema history*, "New Review of Film and Television Studies", vol. 8, n. 3, 2010, p. 329.

14 P. Wickham, H. Hanson, *Living Film Histories: Researching at the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum*, cit., p. 572.

15 *Bill Douglas. My Best Friend* (J. Archer, 2023).

16 P. Jewell, *Collectors' tales: a personal overview of Film Fiction at Bill Douglas Centre*, "Film History", 20, 2008, p. 149.

year in the *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, in it he recounts how it was Jewell's contribution to the day that let us into what it meant for them, especially in his description of their collecting "adventures" and ultimately the intricate and profound relationship Bill Douglas had with film. It is worth quoting in full:

Jewell told vivid stories of how he and Bill used to trawl dusty book shops and attend sales together, always searching for new and exciting materials to add to their collection. He talked us through some of their most incredible chance finds, such as Bill's treasured cinematograph. With this talk came the realisation that the collection was arguably as much Bill's life's work as his films. But what particularly came across during Jewell's reminiscences was the extraordinary strength of their special friendship and the sheer joy both men took in films and the culture of cinema<sup>17</sup>.

This crucial insight about Douglas' filmmaking being as important as his collecting remind us of Benjamin's droll idea that «Of all the ways of acquiring books, writing them oneself is regarded as the most praiseworthy method»<sup>18</sup>. Douglas wrote his film scripts with their acquired collection in mind, something that was noted also by Sean Martin, one of the other contributors to the symposium; the collection of pre-cinema artefacts and their history was intertwined with Douglas' own film aesthetics, with examples from two of his films, *Comrades* and from *My Ain Folk* to the extent which claimed that in the former «Bill and Peter's collection of pre-cinematic artefacts influenced some of the shots Bill would use in the films...»<sup>19</sup>.

In fact, as early as 1993, two years after Douglas' death, a rare publication that went under the title of "Bill Douglas. A Lanternist's Account" signalled in its title the connection of Douglas attachment to pre-cinema history (in the film *Comrades* the Lanternist is a major character), but indirectly, albeit not known at the time, as this was published before the acquisition of the collection by the University of Exeter and the establishment of the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum.

### *Henri Langlois: collector of all things cinema*

It is hard not to think of Langlois as a "compulsive hoarder" of all things cinema, most descriptions of the man veer that way, including narratives about events and conflicts throughout his lifetime. But there was more to his undertakings than sheer obsession. If

17 P. Newland, *Bill Douglas Symposium, Bill Douglas Centre for the History of Cinema and Popular Culture, University of Exeter, 23 September 2011*, "Journal of British Cinema and Television", vol. 9, n. 2, 2012, p. 288.

18 W. Benjamin, *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, cit., p. 60.

19 P. Newland, *Bill Douglas Symposium, Bill Douglas Centre for the History of Cinema and Popular Culture, University of Exeter, 23 September 2011*, cit., p. 288.

Baudrillard's distinction<sup>20</sup> between a collector and a hoarder is the ability to share it or give it away, Langlois certainly falls into the former category. For Langlois the existential question of 'to collect or not to collect' did not exist. For him there was no time to lose, in his own words:

Before you can show an old film, it has to exist – that is, it has to have been “conserved” (in the archival sense). And in order to conserve it, first it has to have been “collected” (in the going-out-of-one’s-way-to-rescue-and- save-what-others-discard sense)<sup>21</sup>.

This idea of collecting ‘discarded objects’ is a recurring theme with cinema collectors. It could partly be ascribed to its specific history, its ties to technological developments which determined the end of one object on a massive scale (silent, black and white films) and the arrival of a new one (talkies, colour). It could also be partly tied to modernity phenomenon of massification, consumption and advertisement which accompanied cinema from its inception.

Cinema was not just in the cinema houses, but in magazines, posters, in domestic objects, souvenirs, etc., what Wickham mentioned above, and many others with him, called cinema’s ephemera. Would Langlois had become a cinema collector and immersed himself with all his energies in a saving project if silent films were not disappearing at such a spectacular rate<sup>22</sup>? Here we return to the idea of loss, because intrinsic to the collecting self is the search (and research) of objects out-there that needs to be found and assembled. The collector is therefore always on a journey, scouring here and there to find that which is lost. Once found it can then become part of what Benjamin called the magic circle<sup>23</sup>.

Langlois as collector was equally attracted to the ephemera as he was of the film themselves. Although for Langlois the ephemera was as much about objects internal to the films as external to them; like all collectors he had his preferences and, on that scale, undoubtedly the silent films themselves were at the top, but not very far down were all the props and costumes used in films he considered masterpieces. It is these two very iconic cinematic sets of objects that significantly Truffaut chose to begin his polemic against Langlois’ undertaking at the Cinémathèque Française. In a talk with Richard Roud, he cuttingly stated that «putting a Garbo costume next to the skull from *Psycho* is a gimmick for tourists»<sup>24</sup>. Truffaut’s criticism had not just come from nowhere and although this was particularly directed to the poor financial situation and at the future trajectory of the Cinémathèque Française, he

20 J. Baudrillard, *The System of Collecting*, in J. Elsner, R. Cardinal (a cura di), *The Cultures of Collecting*, Reaktion Books, London 1994.

21 G. Myrent, G.P. Langlois, *Henry Langlois. First Citizen of Cinema*, Twayne Publishers, New York 1995, p. 37.

22 R. Cere, *An International Study of Film Museums*, Routledge, London 2021, pp. 21-22.

23 W. Benjamin, *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, Schocken Books, New York 1969, p. 60.

24 R. Roud, *A Passion for Films. Henri Langlois and the Cinémathèque Française*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1983, p. 179.

was airing a view, which had been at the centre of the establishment of museums of cinema right from their inception<sup>25</sup>.

He was especially critical of Langlois undertaking as collector of cinema and of his “grand projet” of creating a museum of cinema. He believed it was far more important to concentrate energies and resources (always limited) to making and promoting film screenings as it was done in the early history of the Cinémathèque, but not film screenings just for the sake of box office returns to finance the museum. It is clear that despite the camaraderie following the dismissal of Langlois as Director of the Cinémathèque Française in 1968 and the evidence that all New Wave French film directors rallied around the cause of reinstating him, a few years later views about cinema and its musealisation had diverged. We are a long way from what Stéphanie Louis described as «The Langlois affair... [as] a pivotal moment, initiating the process of heritage practices into art forms, and consequently influencing exhibition practices»<sup>26</sup>.

Truffaut may have been in disagreement with Langlois about his “grand projet” and his ideas of cinema “museological style”<sup>27</sup> but he was not the only one to be concerned about the museum and the fate of the collections exhibited; Lotte Eisner, was also preoccupied with the lack of funding but for different reasons, «we don’t have enough money to put everything behind glass, but there are certain things you shouldn’t leave out where people can touch them and may be even stealing them». And steal they did. (Some of these events are recounted in some details in the book by Myrent and Langlois’ brother Georges)<sup>28</sup>. Lotte Eisner, forever by Langlois’ side in collecting, was in fact a collector in her own right (it is significant that very little is written about women collectors of cinema as opposed to males)<sup>29</sup>.

It is important to point out that for cinema, as for everything else, collecting is often viewed as a personal and individual activity, as well as predominantly male, yet in many collections there is a relational and shared aspect – as we have seen with Bill Douglas and Peter Jewell – that often goes unaccounted for; collecting of any kind does not need to be a solitary activity even if it retracts from the romanticised and stereotyped view of what constitutes a collector; it is also harder to conceive it in pathological terms, because it comes up against the psychoanalytic categories that determine it to be a neurosis. The relational and shared aspect, along with the theme about loss, are just two of the many components that makes up collecting, whether of cinema or, as argued by Forrester about Freud, «of jokes and dream texts»<sup>30</sup>.

25 R. Cere, *An International Study of Film Museums*, Routledge, London, 2021, p. 2.

26 S. Louis, *La Cinémathèque-Musée. Une innovation cinéphile au coeur du cinéma en France (1944-1968)*, Association française de la recherche sur l’histoire du cinéma, 2019, p. 372.

27 L. Mannoni, *Henri Langlois and the Musée du Cinéma*, “Film History”, vol. 18, n. 3, 2006, p. 274.

28 G. Myrent and G. P. Langlois, *Henry Langlois. First Citizen of Cinema*, cit.

29 R. Cere, G. Santaera, G., *Fautrici dei musei del cinema nel mondo: Iris Barry, Lotte Eisner and Kashiko Kawawita*, “Arabeschi”, 23, 2021.

30 J. Forrester, ‘Mille e tre’: *Freud and Collecting*, in J. Elsner, R. Cardinal, (a cura di), *The Cultures of Collecting*, cit., p. 242.

## Conclusion

The questions in the title may appear as a provocation, after all just like in Hamlet, the collectors' existence and their collections are always in doubt, or to put it more forcefully using Benjamin's words: «Only in extinction is the collector comprehended»<sup>31</sup>. I would go further by saying that the question mark may even seem a little paradoxical because how, for example, would we be able to see cinema's silent era films if the likes of Langlois, Lindgren, Prolo and many other too numerous to mention here, had not invested all their intellectual and emotional energies in collecting all things cinema, even at personal cost. At the same time the argument has run that cinema's moving essence is somewhat undermined by the "prison house" of museums and archives. For cinema's memory and relative short history this approach has brought about tensions and conflicts between collectors and filmmakers but also "guardians" of the collecting "genii" that refuses to go back in the bottle.

As more and more successful filmmakers become collectors often simply of their own work, it could bring about a different direction for collections, which although benefiting cinema's future memory, it may also bring about at the same time a loss of spontaneity and originality in what is being collected and what is musealised. It is possible that the nature of collecting will not be fundamentally transformed, or halted, after all as Benjamin stated in his ex-officio discussion as he called it: «[...] the most distinguished trait of a collection will always be its transmissibility»<sup>32</sup>. I would like to think that both Langlois and Douglas offered their collecting selves in that manner.

Time and again it may seem opportune to re-ask the question what is cinema? It may appear as a redundant question over a hundred years on from its invention and many fundamental transformations later. This question, however, is still relevant and also imperative in other ways, as it answers why cinema has ended up in private collections, archives and museums, thus "living" alongside its ontological status of moving image – screened and viewed in as many different spaces, from the habitual auditoria all the way to the private homes and personal phones; what Recuber called the «material factor – the lived and experienced spaces of cinema»<sup>33</sup>. For those who love cinema there is no "competition" between the films, the iconic square of light from the projector and the "soap dishes"; the objects surrounding cinema are infinitesimal and are often the surprising element of cinema collections and one which we must not lose.

The questions raised in the past about whether the film object should just be part of the everyday viewing experience rather than an object to be musealised, I think has become redundant. Even if in a hundred years' time cinema as we know it will not exist anymore, the collectors' traces will let us into the 'magic circle' to catch a glimpse of what it was all about.

31 W. Benjamin, *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, cit., p. 67.

32 Ivi, p. 66.

33 T. Recuber, *Immersion Cinema: The Rationalization and Reenchantment of Cinematic Space*, "Space and Culture", vol. 10, n. 3, 2007, p. 316.