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Toward a Global Film Preservation Movement? Institutional Histories of Film Archiving in Latin America

Upon its founding in 1938, the world’s oldest organization dedicated to audiovisual preservation announced its global ambitions in its choice of name, the Fédération internationale des archives du film (International Federation of Film Archives, FIAF). Yet only European and US institutions participated in its creation, namely the United Kingdom’s National Film Library (now the British Film Institute), the Cinémathèque française, Germany’s Reichsfilmarchiv (shuttered in 1945), and the Film Library of New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). US and European members still dominate FIAF’s ranks today despite initiatives targeting Global South archives, including its School on Wheels, which traveled to several locations in Africa and Latin America between 2002 and 2015, and the editions of the Film Preservation and Restoration Workshop held in Mumbai, Pune, Chennai, Buenos Aires, and Mexico City between 2015 and 2020.¹ As of 2020, under a third of


FIAF’s members and associates were based in Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East. This essay makes the case that media scholars must attend to both the structural inequalities and the mutually beneficial exchanges that mark the global history of the film preservation movement—a history that has long been framed in Euro-American terms—in order to understand their reverberations in the present.

Long-standing global imbalances within the archiving movement fuel regional disparities in preservation, compounding social and environmental factors. These include climate (heat and humidity accelerate the deterioration of film emulsion and magnetic media such as videotape) as well as periodic institutional crises due to financial precarity and political shifts. As I was drafting this text in summer 2020, Latin America’s largest audiovisual archive, the Cinemateca Brasileira, teetered on the brink of closure. The archive had yet to receive any of its yearly budget due to the federal government’s abrupt termination of its contract with the nonprofit charged with administering the Cinemateca, the Associação de Comunicação Educativa Roquette Pinto (ACERP). In August, the Brazilian government took possession of the Cinemateca’s facilities, symbolically confiscating the keys in the presence of federal police. Shortly thereafter, the archive’s forty-one remaining staff members were summarily dismissed. ACERP never received the funds for their wages—they had gone unpaid since early April—and it seemed clear no agreement would be reached. While the government announced it would award a temporary contract to the Sociedade Amigos da Cinemateca (Society of Friends of the Cinémathèque) to administer the archive in December 2020, at this essay’s press time the contract was still unsigned and the Cinemateca remained closed. Unmistakably a manifestation of the right-wing Bolsonaro administration’s onslaught on the cultural sector, which included dissolving the Ministry of Culture and freezing state subsidies for Brazilian film production, the Cinemateca’s state of emergency was partly due to decades of inadequate financial support and precarious infrastructure, which contributed to the nitrate fires that struck the archive in 1957, 1969, 1982, and 2016.

Considering how earlier moments inform these contemporary dilemmas, I identify the archives that emerged in post–World War II Latin America as a key site for examining the successes and limitations of the film preservation movement’s internationalization, given that Latin American institutions were the first outside the United States and Europe to participate in the movement’s expansion. Over a dozen cinémathèques were founded in the region between 1945 and 1965, typically through close contact with FIAF and with the organization’s secretary-general, Henri Langlois of the Cinémathèque française, in particular. In addition to shedding light on long-standing disparities within the film preservation movement, attending to this institutional history can help us incorporate the values and practices of working archivists into academic discourse on “the archive.” Although they have...
offered important correctives to approaches that treat archives as neutral repositories, media scholars often give short shrift to the theory and practice of professionals in the field, instead favoring sweeping declarations about archival configurations of knowledge and power.

My research takes film archives’ internal documents as points of departure for critical reflection on the institutions themselves. I explore the ideals of early Latin American film archivists, their adaptation of preservation methods in challenging conditions, and the role of transnational connections in shaping both the organizational models and the everyday practices of cinémathèques in the region. The records of these archives’ relations with FIAF are dispersed across two continents, most notably at FIAF’s own archives, the Cinemateca Uruguaya, and the Cinemateca Brasileira. In recent years, FIAF has begun to catalog its files, making some available online, and opened its headquarters in Brussels to researchers. My materials tend toward the mundane and even bureaucratic, including conference proceedings, meeting notes, yearly reports, and correspondence. These documents shed light on archives’ interior workings, their contacts with their counterparts, and their negotiations with stakeholders ranging from local and national authorities to supranational organizations such as FIAF and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. My sources document a largely untold history of the film preservation movement beyond its Euro-American manifestations.

The rapid postwar emergence of Latin American cinémathèques, like the history of Global South archives more broadly, has received minimal attention from English-language scholars since early histories of film preservation were written in the 1990s, though two monographs in preparation, Juana Suárez’s Audiovisual Moving Image Archives, Cultural History and the Digital Turn in Latin America and Bliss Cua Lim’s The Archival Afterlives of Philippine Cinema, promise to partially address these gaps in the field. A handful of scholarly books on individual cinémathèques have also appeared in Spanish and Portuguese. Inasmuch as Euro-American discourse on film preservation has addressed Latin American institutions at all, they are typically framed in terms of radical otherness. Most notably, Janet Ceja Alcalá argues that film archiving in the region was a highly politicized practice that drew its inspiration from the leftist New Latin American Cinema, an interpretation that largely holds true for the period she examines—the late 1960s and 1970s—but not for the nearly two decades of archival efforts that preceded it. Focusing on Guatemala’s Cinemateca Universitaria Enrique Torres, Caroline Frick offers a more nuanced


take that emphasizes Latin American archives’ historical and present-day commitment to access over and above physical preservation in many cases. Yet in insisting that the activities of Latin American cinémathèques thus constitute an “alternative preservation practice,” she presents their work as out of step with or actively resisting the international consensus in the field. In fairness, she stresses that this stance is largely due to archives’ economic precarity and the need to raise their profile and that of their collections in order to ensure the survival of both.6

In contrast to these readings, I contend that early Latin American film archives fail to fit neatly into prevailing narratives in Euro-American film studies, which tend to frame the region’s film history in terms of social commitment, political resistance, and opposition to Hollywood, hallmarks of New Latin American Cinema. Rather, the region’s cinémathèques participated in reciprocal exchanges of cultural prestige and institutional influence with FIAF, suggesting the strategic uses of conceptions of film as art both for international organizations and Latin America’s emerging middle classes. Early archivists in the region had close links to the film society movement, which sought to create alternative spaces for viewing and discussing films deemed to be classics or contemporary works of art cinema. Participating in a broader postwar legitimation of the medium, film societies offered a sense of social distinction to their participants at a moment of economic growth and upward mobility for many Latin Americans.

In leveraging the international prestige attached to film classics to reinforce social hierarchies, early Latin American film archives proved less “alternative” or counter-hegemonic than prevailing Euro-American perceptions of film culture in the region might lead one to expect. Moreover, these institutions did not initially seek to valorize domestic film production in the face of perceived cultural colonization by the United States and Europe. In fact, they showed little interest in either physically preserving or constructing the notion of a national film heritage—which Frick identifies as the guiding principle of early US and European archives—until the mid-1950s.7 Rather, they were created in order to participate in noncommercial exchanges of film prints, a practice that FIAF sought to monopolize in order to minimize competition with commercial exhibition and film industry backlash. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Langlois encouraged film society organizers he encountered in France—including Brazilian and Cuban students Paulo Emílio Salles Gomes and Germán Puig, Argentine critic Andrés José Rolando Fustiñana, and Catalan bookseller Luis Vicens—to create archives, if only on paper. This allowed their organizations to receive prints in compliance with FIAF regulations that limited their circulation to exchanges between members.8

These institution-building efforts advanced FIAF’s efforts to expand and regulate the noncommercial circulation of films internationally while also bolstering Langlois’s influence in the organization, since establishing new archives provided him with ready-made allies within the membership.\(^9\) For their part, Latin American archivists took advantage of their links to the broader film preservation movement to advance their institutional goals. Since these organizations often sought archival prints in order to circulate them to the film societies that supported them financially, borrowed cultural capital literally bankrolled the region’s early film archives in some cases.\(^10\)

Members of the FIAF leadership thus viewed their Latin American counterparts as useful partners in expanding the dissemination of film heritage on a global scale. As early as 1948, the organization had explored creating a shared repository of prints that members would contribute to and borrow from, an idea initially proposed by Iris Barry of MoMA’s Film Library.\(^11\) Acting as a preservation safeguard by multiplying existing copies of films, this circulation pool would also help meet growing demand from archives and associated film societies for prints by supplementing existing archive-to-archive exchanges.\(^12\) The mechanism of the pool also promised to redress the disadvantages faced by small archives within FIAF, since bilateral exchanges were difficult to establish when organizations had few titles to offer their counterparts. At the 1957 FIAF congress, Langlois affirmed, “The goal of the pool is to help incipient archives obtain programming. It is absolutely certain that M. Vicens in Colombia, or M. Roland [Fustiñana] in Argentina, and tomorrow someone in Karachi in India \[sic\] can obtain programming, the archive movement will gain momentum.”\(^13\) In Langlois’s view, facilitating access to prints was a crucial step for generating interest in film heritage and thus building archival capacity globally. Latin American archives and archivists were recruited as pioneers in this process.

During the mid-1950s, FIAF experimented with decentralization by creating a regional section known as the Latin American Pool in English, the Sección Latinoamericana in Spanish, and the Seção Latino-Americana in Portuguese. Once again, the initiative originated with Langlois.\(^14\) Despite holding four regional conferences between 1955 and 1960, the Latin American Pool’s local activities never gained momentum. Its existence is a tes-
tament both to FIAF’s investment in global expansion and to its failure to adequately address the structural imbalances that marked the organization’s functioning.

The Latin American Pool was intended to foster intraregional cooperation in the preservation and circulation of film materials while also addressing institutional practices that disadvantaged cash-strapped Latin American archives. Revealingly, FIAF congresses were held exclusively in Europe between 1946 and 1968; one would not be held in Latin America until the 1976 meeting in Mexico City. Attending them was thus an expensive prospect for Latin American archivists. In theory, members of the Latin American Pool would meet collectively and then delegate a member to attend the conference as their joint representative, but this proved difficult in practice. Tellingly, the Latin American Pool’s initial report to FIAF, slated for 1955, was never delivered. 15 Similarly, FIAF members were required to pay their dues in first French and later Swiss francs despite unfavorable currency exchange rates for Latin American archives, which worsened during a period of rapid inflation in the early 1960s. 16 FIAF agreed these institutions could pay half their dues directly to the Latin American Pool in order to mitigate this issue somewhat, but few actually did so. Challenges surrounding travel and the nonpayment of dues are recurring themes in the correspondence between the Latin American Pool and FIAF, suggesting an impasse in the latter’s efforts to fully include its Latin American members and these members’ ability to meet FIAF’s institutional standards given their financial circumstances.

Due to a lack of funds, customs barriers, and catastrophic events such as the 1957 fire at the Cinemateca Brasileira, the Latin American Pool never managed to circulate a single film program among its members. 17 However, it served as a precedent for later regional cooperative efforts, including the Unión de Cinematecas de América Latina (1965–1984) and the Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Archivos de Imágenes en Movimiento, founded in 1985 and still active today.

As this brief account of early Latin American film archives’ relations with FIAF suggests, these institutions were not radically “other” from their Euro-American counterparts, since they also viewed preservation and access through largely depoliticized notions of film as art. Nor were they simply instruments of cultural colonization, although they enlisted the aid of foreign institutions as a source of prestige. Rather, these cinémathèques participated in mutual exchanges of cultural capital and institutional influence with FIAF and its members, their existence attesting to the organization’s internationalism and desired global reach. Ultimately, the history of the Latin American Pool offers something of a cautionary tale for present-day

15 Meeting notes, 1956 Sección Latinoamericana de la FIAF Congress, 5–6, Arquivo Histórico, Cinemateca Brasileira.
efforts to globalize film preservation, highlighting the structural barriers that continue to shape their impact.

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