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ROCHESTER REFLECTIONS – THE 10TH FIAF SUMMER SCHOOL, AND BEYOND

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The Atlantic Ocean and nearly thirty years separates the 10th FIAF Summer School at George Eastman House, Rochester, NY from the first Summer School at the Staatliches Filmarchiv, Berlin in 1973. The world, like the challenges of film archiving and FIAF itself, may have changed much in those three decades. But one thing has not changed: the passion and dedication of the archivists whom the schools have done so much to shape. I can attest to this because I was a participant in both events: in the first as a student, and in this one as a lecturer.

The tenth Summer School was held from 10 to 28 June, 2002. The 19 FIAF participants were joined by 8 students of the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation, the year-long course which is a fixture at the Eastman House. Like the students, the lecturers were an international group, and the roll call of countries represented in the event were an interesting comment on the global character of the profession today: Australia, Burkina Faso, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Macedonia, Mexico, Netherlands, South Africa, United Kingdom, United States, Vietnam.

It's worth describing the setting, for George Eastman House (GEH), also known as the International Museum of Photography and Film, is an unusual environment. Originally the home of the founder of Kodak, the house proper is a striking and expansive mansion, surrounded by beautiful gardens and maintained as a public museum. Display galleries, theatres, museum and archive facilities have been added over the years, with the Motion Picture Department housed appropriately in the Peristyle, a spectacular below-ground structure which is eerily evocative of a futuristic movie set. The arrangement of these facilities on a single site, with the Archive itself always close at hand, makes GEH an excellent place for hands-on learning.

The curriculum covered the major aspects of archive operation: conservation, collection development, cataloguing, access, programming, philosophy, ethics and aspects of general management. The middle week of the School was an extensive field trip, embracing inspections of various collection storage, conservation and laboratory facilities in the north eastern United States. Back in Rochester, Olwen Terris lectured on cataloguing, Peter Brothers, Paul Read and Bob Heiber shared their technical and preservation experience, Mike Mashon covered collection development and management, while John Kirk, Martin Koerber, school director Paolo Chechi Usai and I spread ourselves over the other topics.

If it sounds like a lot to pack into three weeks, it was. But that is the nature of summer schools: they are intensive, a kind of temporary community making the most of a finite opportunity. Everyone is highly motivated, and information exchange seems faster and more acute than the normal rhythm of daily life. And it is their nature as a communal experience that makes them so special and effective: three weeks provides long enough to form bonds and networks that will enrich the professional lives of all participants. These will, in many cases, continue for the rest of their careers. Those networks, in turn, will be vital to archive building and the long term growth of the profession around the world. (I know this to be true: I still keep in touch with colleagues I met at that first summer school in 1973, just as I have since shared the email exchanges among the 2002 participants.)

If the spirit evident in the graduation ceremony on the last evening was a measure of the success of the School – and it surely was – then I felt this representative group of the new generation of archivists had been well chosen, and well served by the experience. I have no doubt that they will treasure their certificates as proudly as I still treasure mine. Like the other lecturers, I felt I gained more than I gave through the time spent among such keen minds and such personal commitment.

What comes next? For some of us the School also provided the opportunity for reflection about the future of archival training. Is this now traditional summer school model still valid? Is its high cost still justifiable? Are there better approaches? What difference should the emergence of permanent training courses for audiovisual archivists, a phenomenon of the last decade, make to this pattern?

When the first FIAF Summer School was held in 1973 it was an innovative idea in a still rather youthful and unique federation. It was then, so to speak, the only show in town. Today FIAF is much larger and more diverse, and it has been joined by newer federations within the audiovisual archiving spectrum. Archives have proliferated worldwide, and the sometimes desperate need for training has expanded exponentially, just like the dizzying speed of technological change in the audiovisual media themselves, and hence in the challenges and complexity of archiving. Even if Summer Schools were held annually they would come nowhere near meeting the needs that are now evident.

Other federations, such as FIAT and SEAPAVAA, have tried different approaches, such as shorter workshops on specific topics, sometimes linked to other events like conferences in order to amortise travel costs. SEAPAVAA has successfully tried the concept of the “travelling workshop” – a week-long course on a particular theme, run sequentially in several countries for local participants in each. These are relatively cheap, because the main cost is that of importing the one or two teachers or resource persons – not the participants. The workshops are able to include field visits to the local archives and anchor the training to local conditions.

The permanent training courses provide an advanced academic qualification and, because of their duration, can impart a greater depth of information and experience, along with a holistic frame of reference. They are crucial to the long overdue recognition of audiovisual archiving as a distinct discipline. They are gradually growing in number,

along with the increasing presence of audiovisual topics in regular archival and library science courses. However, such courses and components are not necessarily anchored to particular archives, communities or federations like FIAF. By definition, they are also expensive - so they are not equally available to everyone.

The idea of a FIAF “summer school on wheels” is one concept that emerges from comparison and reflection: something more regionally focussed and less costly in terms of travel and accommodation, something of varying duration which can be tailored to more localised needs and agendas, something which might involve partnerships among a group of archives or even between federations, rather than reliance on a single institution – and of course something which can happen much more frequently than just once every three years.

Our field is now complex and expanding, and has long outgrown the “one size fits all” solution. If we are going to meet training needs adequately in future we will require a variety of approaches and partnerships. With the emergence of the CCAAA (Coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archive Associations) we have a potential framework in which these needs can be approached comprehensively, cooperatively and strategically.

Of course, expanded training programs, no matter how cost effective, will in the end cost more than they do now, and the funds will need to be found. Yet the biggest challenge is not money. It is the availability of trainers. How many archives will be willing to release their most highly skilled people for extensive blocks of time to train and mentor others? The challenge will only be met if the more developed archives are willing to regard the training of others as a professional obligation and a proper charge on their budgets: perhaps to become in some cases (as GEH already is) “teaching” archives, adapted to a constant flow of trainees in their normal work. The medical profession has long done this: without “teaching hospitals” we would soon run out of trained doctors and nurses. The same, I suspect, will be true of archives.

Nevertheless, none of this negates the validity of the FIAF Summer School concept as we have known it for thirty years. Assembling the brightest and best from around the globe for a brief but intensive period together still has no substitute, though we might usefully review its curriculum and more deliberately use its strategic potential to develop the leaders of tomorrow’s profession. The future is not “either/or” but “both/and”. The challenge is to expand our view from the success of one model to the possibilities and practicalities of several.