Avant-garde culture and media strategies: the networks and discourses of the European film avant-garde, 1919-39

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Chapter 3: Strategic Convergence and Functional Differentiation – The Film Societies and Ciné-Clubs of the 1920s and 30s

Selbstverständlich kostet uns die Organisierung der Arbeit weit mehr Mühe als die (künstlerische) Arbeit selber, das heißt, wir kamen immer mehr dazu, die Organisation für einen wesentlichen Teil der künstlerischen Arbeit zu halten.

Es war das nur möglich, weil die Arbeit als ganze eine politische war.

Bertolt Brecht, Slatan Dudow et al. (1931/32)

Film clubs, film societies and ciné-clubs have not been high on the agenda of film historians. While, generally speaking, production has always generated more research than distribution and exhibition this special case of circulation has largely been left on the margins. Ciné-clubs and film societies have either been dealt with in biographical works of individuals that played a decisive role in and devoted time and energy to these efforts or in regional studies which concentrated on a specific city (and often a specific screening space or a specific institutional context). Both approaches to these alternative outlets neglect on the one hand the national and international exchange of the initiatives, on the other it has limited the scope to specific constellations thus not reaching a comparatistic perspective. In keeping with my aim of contextualising artistic practice and doing archaeological historiography of the avant-garde I intend to examine the nexus of film societies, their activities and publications, their programming policies and networking efforts. I consider film societies as social organisms which provide a framework for viewing and discussing films, for developing theories and for distributing and making films. This chapter follows roughly a chronological itinerary from the first efforts after World War One to the emerging mass movement of the late 1920s. I will consider the programming policy as well as the manifestoes and programmes as artifacts that constitute an alternative and oppositional practice. The upsurge towards a boom around 1930 will be treated under the heading strategic convergence – this increase was due to the fact that different groups united for some time under the avant-garde banner. The development in the 1920s until the watershed around 1930 could be summed up as strategic convergence. I will furthermore consider the development in the 1930s in respect to how the cinema came to occupy a different position for the nation state and archives were instituted. My guiding concept for the development after the coming of sound will be functional differentiation. The coming of sound will be a conceptual relay as this transition brought contradictions into the open and forced the avant-garde to reconsider and reconfigure their activities. Traditional answers to some of the
problems posed in this chapter have somewhat simplisticly been given by those involved in the societies. A characteristic example is from Ivor Montagu – central figure of the London Film Society – who, on being questioned about some of the shifts and ruptures of the inter-war period, gives as the reason the naïve answer: »because the time was ripe«.3

Most things that is generally known about the 1920s and 1930s and the activities of the film societies, ciné-clubs, Filmligas, Filmverbände we owe to the people that were actually involved in the initiatives. The few people who started the film clubs and then became important figures in film making, film publishing, film theory, and film archives were also the ones to write down their stories. In fact, the pioneers of the 1920s have not only written their own histories, but moreover they were the ones to pen the first important books on film theory and history as well as the ones to start archives and university courses. A fairly small group of activists, practitioners and theoreticians, mobile and ambitious, first made history and later wrote it down, created the first canon in the film societies and subsequently determined which films were written about and preserved. They practically predetermined what later generations were able to watch, read, and think about. Yet, the topic of this remark is not in the first place to object to their actual activities and writings, but rather my surprise at how unquestioned this pioneer generation was (and still is) taken at face value in their memories and mythologies.

What could be called »the first wave of cinephilia«4 includes not only the films that have claims to fame, but, more importantly, activities in the cinema sector beyond the commercial and industrial structures in a wide sense (exhibition, publishing, public debate, distribution). I will confine myself mainly to key activities in Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and France in the 1920s and 1930s. This limitation is not only dictated by practicability of access to material, but – as will emerge in this chapter – it follows the pattern of closest cooperation and most intense activities. Film societies were typical of large metropolitan centres which had a sufficient density of artists and intellectuals interested in novel and innovative use of film. Even though there were similar efforts in »marginal« places like Portugal, Poland or Denmark, these were not as continuous, as broad and as closely connected as the phenomena that I am dealing with here. I will argue that the practically simultaneous growth of film clubs in several European cultural centres was far from coincidental and is intertwined with a technological shift, i.e. the coming of sound, but also with changes of the public sphere, a reconfigured film industry and a generally transformed political landscape. Far from disappearing without a trace or failing in its goals as traditional historiography would have it, the ciné-clubs had a strong impact in the longer run. In the course of the 1930s, the activities led to (self-)employment in various educational, governmental and filmmaking bodies, but more importantly also to film archives.

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While the main cities in Europe were Amsterdam, Berlin, Brussels, London, and Paris I am leaving out two other territories important for alternative film culture in this chapter: the Soviet Union and the United States, the two »big others« for Western Europe. While I will deal with the Soviet Union in a separate chapter, the United States would constitute its own work and will not be dealt with me here in any detail. It will crop up here and there, but it will stay in the wings and I can only refer to some of the more important research that has been done on alternative movements in the United States. Furthermore, as bourgeois art never had a strong (public) footing with state support and elite backing, the avant-garde in the US had a different relationship to mass culture and technology. For that reason, an inclusion of the Unites States would alter the perspective considerably. A final nod before I delve into the material proper should go to avant-garde developments in Japan which to some extent paralleled those in Europe and the United States, but they also diverged considerably and have been the topic of some accessible studies recently.

3.1 Emergence

Les passionnés du cinématographe se comptent par dizaines de millions, appartenant à tout le pays, à toutes les classes, depuis les plus intellectuelles jusqu'à celles dont la culture est plus rudimentaire.

Charles de Vesme (1920)

When thinking about the beginnings of film societies one encounters problems of definition and dates well-known to the historian of early cinema in relation to the »emergence of cinema«. Thomas Elsaesser has described the problems inherent in any definition of the origins of cinema:

[B]ei der Überlegung, was denn eigentlich Kino sei, bleibt manche Selbstverständlichkeit auf der Strecke. Ist es eine Reihe von Fotografien, die Bewegungsabläufe festhält, oder sind es Bilder, gezeichnet oder fotografiert, die mechanisch angetrieben werden, um den Eindruck kontinuierlicher Bewegung zu erwecken? [...] Ist es das projizierte Bild oder die Vorführung lebender Bilder vor einem zahlenden Publikum? [...] Es gibt [...] mindestens [...] zwei Dutzend [...] Anwärter.

In this vein we should pause for a moment and reconsider what the kind of object is we are dealing with here. What constitutes a ciné-club – that is shows exclusively films or that it formulates an anti-establishment stance? Is it imperative that it works on a subscription basis or that it invites practitioners for debates? Is a necessary condition that its main aim is aesthetic connoisseurship or that it has an explicitly political agenda? Similar to the problem of the origin and birth of cinema, we should be wary of locating foundational moments that can be charged with historical significance and rather question the parameters guiding these decisions.
Convergence and Differentiation

Despite these cautionary remarks it appears almost certain that Paris has always been (and continues to be today) the capital of cinephilia and cinema culture\textsuperscript{10} – this chapter shall have as its launch pad developments in the French capital. There are several events one could point to and choosing one is probably as arbitrary as choosing another when locating the origin of a practice that had many forerunners in theatre clubs and artists’ societies, in associations for workers’ cultural education and other gatherings devoted to the aesthetic and cultural appreciation of the cinema. Nevertheless, the screening at the Parisian cinema \textit{La Pépinière} on 12 June 1920 organised and conducted by Louis Delluc, Georges Denola and Charles de Vesme and devoted to the work of French animator Emile Cohl has often been seen as a beginning of considerable significance.\textsuperscript{11} This event evolved into a movement (the formation of the \textit{Ciné-club de France} can be traced back to this screening), it was located in Paris and it was co-organised by Louis Delluc who was one of the key figure in Parisian intellectual cinema culture of the early 1920s – for these reasons this moment has been often singled out as the »origin« of a practice that later came to be known as ciné-clubs and film societies.\textsuperscript{12} It was in the spring of 1921, when the Italian-born critic Ricciotto Canudo followed suit with another influential film society, the \textit{Club des Amis du Septième Art (CASA)} – the origin of the phrase »Seventh Art« is to be found in Canudo’s writings and activities. CASA was mainly frequented by members of the avant-garde such as Germaine Dulac, Marcel L’Herbier, Alberto Cavalcanti, Jean Epstein, Léon Moussinac, Blaise Cendrars, Jean Cocteau, Robert Mallet-Stevens, Fernand Léger, Jaqueline Catelain, Harry Baur, and Gaston Modot. While Delluc was a theatre critic and writer, Canudo had moved in the circles of the European avant-garde (primarily visual arts) before turning to the cinema. While Delluc’s \textit{conférences} and published texts regarded film as a democratic mass art, Canudo’s CASA was more high-brow and frequented mostly by artists and intellectuals.\textsuperscript{13} In early 1925 the organisations founded by Delluc (which had in the meantime been taken over by Léon Moussinac) and Canudo merged after both Canudo and Delluc had died (Canudo in 1923, Delluc in 1924). This merger resulted in the first nationwide organisation of its type linking different filmclubs into the \textit{Ciné-Clubs de France} which later came under the directorship of Léon Moussinac, Jacques Feyder, and Germaine Dulac.\textsuperscript{14} Already in these beginnings can be seen the seeds for a strategic convergence that would take place over the course of the 1920s: high-brow modernists, cinephiles with a confidence in film’s potential as mass art\textsuperscript{15}, political activists on both ends of the spectrum (even though mainly left-wing), anarchists and pacifists, technological visionaries of romantic inclination (just think of F.W. Murnau or Abel Gance) and others all rallied around avant-gardistic concepts. In the years leading up to the introduction of sound the avant-garde was capable of integrating various groups into an (apparently) common cause. It is also interesting to note that these activists were simultaneously filmmakers, writers, and activists-organisers, a crucial element of this first wave.
Cinema was not yet fully functionally differentiated as those players could easily cross lines between different segments.16

The number of ciné-clubs in Paris quickly rose in the course of the 1920s and the first ciné-club outside Paris seems to have been founded in 1925 in Montpellier.17 Often ciné-clubs were instigated by journals or the other way round; already in this nascent form the alternative networks were characterised by an approach that incorporated different media and a variety of public addresses (screenings, conferences, magazines, leaflets). Contrary to commercial cinemas which sold a film on the strength of a star or a story the ciné-clubs aimed at gathering an audience of subscribers in order to have a guaranteed public for each separate screening. Magazines, leaflets, discussions and other supplements formed part of the media strategy followed by the avant-garde. Other activities such as exhibitions soon followed. While Canudo’s club had been already active within the high modernist and intellectually high-brow Salon d’Automne for some years, 1924 saw a first major exhibition on the cinema, L’Art dans le cinéma français, at the Musée Galliera.18

In the mid-1920s the ciné-clubs were joined by cinemas specialising in avant-garde and film art while also constructing a repertory of classics. Three places deserve mention as legendary screening spaces: the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier which opened on 14 November 1924 with a programme of André Sauvage’s mountain-climbing documentary LA TRAVERSÉE DU GRÉPON / L’ASCENSION DU GRÉPON (FR 1923), Marcel Silver’s experimental L’HORLOGE (FR 1924) and Charlie Chaplin’s short SUNNYSIDE (US 1921). This mixture of repertory classics, non-fiction and experimental work in a more narrow sense was typical for avant-garde clubs as well as cinemas of the 1920s. The mixed interests combining scientific, educational and aesthetic streaks were much broader than retrospective considerations of the avant-garde focused on formal innovations in a handful of classics would have it. The Vieux Colombier was run by Jean Tédesco who had taken over the editorship of the cinephile magazine Cinéa in 1924 after Louis Delluc had died. The second important cinema, the Studio des Ursulines, was directed by Armand Tallier. It opened on 21 January 1926 in Montparnasse and its initial programme consisted of »twenty minutes of prewar cinema, twenty minutes of avant-garde cinema, and an unreleased film of a more accessible character and aesthetic«.19 Or, to give the exact titles of this mixture of repertory, experiment, and accessible art cinema: MIMOSA LA DERNIÈRE GRISSETTE (FR 1906, Leonce Perret), a re-edited version of ENTR’ACTE (FR 1924, René Clair / Francis Picabia) and FREUDLOSE GASSE (DE 1925, G.W. Pabst, »Joyless Street«). The third important cinema for avant-garde and repertory purposes that came in existence in Paris in the 1920s was the Studio 28 under the directorship of Jean Maulclaire which borrowed its name from the year it opened.20 Not coincidentally these names of avant-garde theatres allude to other arts, in this case to painting and theatre, a strategy typical of later art house cinemas and video shops with a more ambitious
offer calling themselves Theatre, Studio or Gallery. The French film clubs leaned towards debate and were more communicative than their British pendants. Film societies in Britain were far more frontal with introductions to the films whereas in France it was more common to have discussion afterwards. Ian Christie has pointed out that the French started theorising the medium's specificity (*photogénie* was the key term), but also built a whole system around it: »They [the French avant-garde] spawned a support system of film clubs, specialized cinemas, and magazines, all devoted to the promotion of film as modern art; and this network soon spread beyond France, creating a sympathetic context for innovative work from elsewhere«. The motive of the network is crucial to my approach as film was re-invented as a discursive medium by the avant-garde. In its early years many had seen film as a tool for science and a means of making money (like the Lumière-brothers). The 1910s by contrast were characterised by pedagogical distrust in the reform-oriented debates about the status of the cinema. Only in the 1920s film was gaining respectability in this diversification into many different fields. To give but one example: Jean Tédesco who ran the *Théâtre du Vieux Colombier* not only worked in exhibition and publishing (the journal *Cinéa*), but he also went into film production himself. He commissioned Jean Epstein with a compilation illustrating the concept of *PHOTOGÉNIES* (FR 1924) which was compiled from outtakes and non-fiction material. Tédesco subsequently became the house producer of Epstein as he financed his following films like *SIX ET DEMI-ONZE* (FR 1927), *LA GLACE À TROIS FACE* (FR 1927), and *LA CHUTE DE LA MAISON USHER* (FR 1928). Moreover, he improvised a studio on the roof of his cinema where Renoir shot *LA PETITE MARCHANDE D'ALLUMETTES* (FR 1927/28). Tédesco as an avant-garde activist did not limit himself to programming and running a cinema, but his approach to film was much broader and encompassed different segments of a *Medienverbund* such as production and publishing.

In England the situation was different and it took longer until a broader support for the cinema found its common cause. It was film critic Ivor Montagu who came from London to Paris in 1925 to find out more about how to start, programme, and run a film club. Montagu had met the actor Hugh Miller on the return journey from a field trip to Berlin where he had reported for *The Times* on German film while Miller had acted in a film shot in Germany. On a voyage between these two European production centres the idea for an alternative exhibition organisation in Britain was first formulated. The explicit model was the British Stage Society which was instrumental in bringing Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Cocteau, Pirandello and other modern authors to the attention of a wider audience in England; the original name should have been *Independent Film Theatre Ltd*, but it was subsequently changed. An assorted circle of people interested in film art was gathered in 1925 in London to form the *Film Society*, including critics Iris Barry and Walter Mycroft, Lord Sidney Bernstein, a »socialist millionaire«, and director
Adrian Brunel. Founding members were also H.G. Wells, G.B. Shaw, J.M. Keynes and many more giving their names for cultural capital and respectability. The British Film Society, compared to its continental relatives, was relatively high-brow and bourgeois; it modelled itself on a theatre society and boasted famous writers – the explicit model was first and foremost literature and theatre. Despite these high-brow credentials (or maybe because of them?), the organisation did not find cooperation within the film industry. Adrian Brunel fell from grace with the film industry because of his involvement with the Film Society, resigning from the council in order to get his industry job back, »as my employers insisted that my association with the Society would damage the prestige of the films I made for them«. On the whole, the British film industry was opposed to the idea of a film society as they considered alternative activities as interference in their business. Yet, part of the reason for this rejection might be the explicit address to the present and future film industry (including the trade press) whereas in other countries the target group were less explicitly the industry and rather the intellectual tastemakers.

Indeed, the founding manifesto of the Film Society explicitly aimed at changing the film industry from within; even though this text is comparably low-key as opposed to more radical battle cries from Germany or the Netherlands:

The Film Society has been founded in the belief that there are in this country a large number of people who regard the cinema with the liveliest interest, and who would welcome an opportunity seldom afforded the general public of witnessing films of intrinsic merit, whether new or old... It is felt to be of the utmost importance that films of the type proposed should be available to the Press, and to the film trade itself, including present and (what is more important) future British film producers, editors, cameramen, titling experts and actors... It is important that films of this type should not only be shown under the best conditions of the most actively minded people both inside and outside the film world, but that they should, from time to time, be revived. This will be done. In this way standards of taste and of executive ability may be raised and a critical tradition established. This cannot but affect future productions...

Despite tensions between Film Society and film industry and despite the fact that we tend to think nowadays of clear-cut distinctions between the industry and the artistic side, most of the key figures involved in the founding of the society also had close links with the industry: Miller was an actor in commercial productions, Brunel was a successful commercial director who also tried his hand at experiments, but certainly not someone who would be mentioned nowadays in the same breath with Eisenstein, Ruttman or Man Ray. Lord Bernstein made his money as an exhibitor and distributor backing the film society with his involvement in the industry. He ran the Granada cinema chain which showed quality film programmes. Even the critics that one would suspect to side with the artists had a lot of cross-over potential: Barry who moved in the circles of T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Herbert Read, W.B. Yeats, and Ezra Pound at that time, had gotten her start
working in the film industry, reporting for *The Spectator* on trade shows for Bernstein’s Granada chain. Later in New York, she would establish very close ties with Hollywood in order to fill the archive at the newly founded film department of the *Museum of Modern Art (MOMA)*. Some time later, Montagu and Brunel created a small company for the retitling of foreign films into English that were shown at the *Film Society*. This company became the entry point for young enthusiasts into film making, many of whom became later associated with the British Documentary Film Movement. Yet, not all of them went into the Grierson-circle: Montagu worked with Michael Balcon and Alfred Hitchcock, he was active in left-wing film activities in the 1930s and founded a society of film technicians. The combination of such diverse activities is unthinkable nowadays. In the introduction to an interview in *Screen*, Montagu is described as »one of a rare species in that he was a cinema intellectual and a producer working in the orthodox commercial feature industry.« Contrary to this statement these people moving back and forth between industry and writing, between publishing, distribution and promotion are not really »rare«, but much more typical of that period than we are accustomed to think. As we will see, this opposition between art and business is foremost a rhetorical device used to create a common enemy and banner under which people could be gathered who otherwise had a very different outlook (in terms of politics, culture, organisation). The British situation was special insofar as a high-brow organisation monopolised avant-garde cinema for a relatively long time. The convergence in this case was between different cultural agents that occupied key positions in literature, the theatre, the film industry or journalism – different segments of society took an active interest in the cinema and formed an elite network through the London Film Society. Only with the founding of left-leaning screening clubs and production cooperatives such as the workers’ film societies around 1930 did a more political streak enter the film avant-garde in the British context.

In Amsterdam legend has it that a scandalous and overcrowded screening of Pudovkin’s *MATJ* (SU 1926, *Mother*) organised by the artist’s society *De Kring* in May 1927 led to the formation of the *Filmliga*. The film was temporarily stopped by the police, people were fleeing out the windows until finally the Amsterdam mayor was woken up late at night to decide that the screening could continue. While this is not entirely wrong in factographic terms, it contains a measure of legend building typical of autobiographically tainted story telling. The idea to that night originated with a film distributor who had bought Pudovkin’s film, but was not able to screen it because censorship prohibited a public exhibition of the film. This business man was Ed. Pelster, member of the of the trade organisation *Nederlandsche Bioscoop-Bond (NBB)* as well as of the *Filmliga*, but he remained an outsider in the circle of Joris Ivens, Menno ter Braak and Henrik Scholte. With press screenings he mobilised journalists who then in turn organised this closed screening for the artistic society. About a year later the film passed
censorship and went into »ordinary« commercial distribution with some success. On the one hand, the Filmliga was claiming as one of its aims to help films that were not screened otherwise. In fact, the Filmliga could not help MOTHER to get distribution since a distributor was already waiting to bring the film into the cinemas before and after the incident. The real problem here (as quite often in the interwar period) was censorship, yet even here it is not quite clear in which direction the support went. When thinking about who helped whom it was, probably counter-intuitively, Pudovkin’s film that gave the Filmliga a publicity push because papers all over the country reported on the MOTHER-incident and on the new society that was started as a reaction to the events. On the other hand, the Filmliga helped the commercial distributor when the film got its normal cinema release more than a year later – as is well known from many instances, a scandal is the best thing that can happen to a work of art. In fact, the Filmliga was not able to screen MOTHER when it came out because the distributor (even though he was a member of the Filmliga) preferred to rent the film to commercial cinemas.

The first manifesto of the Dutch Filmliga pitted cinema against film, kitsch against art: »Eens op de honderd keep zien wij: de film. Voor de rest zien wij: bioscoop.« The activists of the Filmliga were sharply distinguishing the good object film from the bad object cinema. This stance is echoed in serious film criticism, archiving, and theory: It is only the film that counts in this view, not the cinema experience, the architecture, social activity, sound accompaniment, habits of visits and a multitude of other factors relevant to the film experience. This framework of cinema going as an activity only became important in the 1990s when the influence of cultural studies, new film history and media archaeology began to make an impression in film studies. Even in the 1920s the simplicistic dualism of commercialism vs. art, kitsch vs. culture, avant-garde vs. industry was never pure and a rather crude construction. To give some examples: The Soviet trade agencies trying to sell revolutionary films in Western Europe would much rather make a deal with commercial distributors (as foreign currency was badly needed) than with a film society which normally would pay less money. When Eisenstein visited the Netherlands in 1930, he spent much more time with the association of commercial distributors than with the Filmliga (much to the dismay of the Filmliga). And when, to cross the Channel for an additional example, POTEMKIN first came to England it was not at the request of the Film Society, but it was arranged by the Film Booking Offices, a commercial company which had a contract with the Soviet trade delegation in Berlin.

The history of audience organisations in Germany testifies to the heavily politicised public sphere of the Weimar Republic. Initiatives for alternative exhibition (mainly ambulant cinemas) existed in Germany from the early 1920s onwards. The travelling projections were organised by political groups such as Willi Münzenberg’s Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (IAH) und other grassroots
The IAH was founded in 1921 when a famine struck parts of the Soviet Union and Münzenberg was asked to organise a world-wide aid programme for the inhabitants of the affected regions. Unlike the German communist party KPD which only started their film activities around 1930, the IAH was active in film work from its inception and toured with film programmes through local chapters. In winter 1924/25 a tour with three Soviet non-fiction films (on child care for orphans, on the winter help activities of the IAH for the Soviet population and on Lenin’s funeral) took place mainly through medium-sized towns in the Southwest of Germany. Production and distribution were later organised through Münzenberg’s company Prometheus. Attempting to construct an alternative to the power of the large media conglomerates Münzenberg consciously emulated the model of the national-conservative media entrepreneur Hugenberg. Socialdemocratic and unionist organisations – in direct competition over working-class support with the communists for most of the 1920s – also arranged cinema events. Yet, unlike film societies and like many of the IAH activities mentioned above these were not audience organisations, but rather politically motivated screening events for an audience of party members. Film societies typically grew out of a group of people gathering around a different kind and use of film. The socialdemocrats were quicker than the Communists to use film as a means of propaganda and persuasion. In 1922 the socialdemocratic party SPD with the support of the trade union Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (ADGB) founded the Volksfilmbühne and its own »Film- und Lichtspieldienst« for production and distribution of films. Their two productions, DIE SCHMIEDE (DE 1924, Martin Berger) and FREIES VOLK (DE 1925, Martin Berger), led to public controversies and were financially not successful. These early initiatives were top-down insofar as members of left-wing parties got involved in cultural film work in order to mobilise members for political action, either for singular events or for a regular audience organisation. In this respect, they present marginal cases of film societies which are normally defined as audience associations starting from grassroot activities.

The situation in Germany is different than in France, the Netherlands or England as the politisation was much stronger while the »cinephile« or »essentialist« leanings of the Parisian or Amsterdam cineaste apparently were much weaker in Berlin, Hamburg, Breslau, Stuttgart or Frankfurt. The politically motivated screening clubs only came into existence in England and the Netherlands around 1930 (workers’ film society, Vereeniging voor Volkscultuur) while they precede the aesthetically oriented organisations in Germany. Yet, ideas and local initiatives for film clubs with an artistically oriented agenda can be detected in the first half of the 1920s. An editorial in the liberal trade journal Film-Kurier in May 1923 called for a »Film-Liga«, a society for screening artistically ambitious films, in order to convince opponents of the film (»Film-Gegner«, a term later taken up by Hans Richter) of the value of certain films. As a public figure head Gerhart
Hauptmann is proposed as an intellectual and artist with an outspoken interest in the cinema. The whole idea is put forward in a spirit of reform and education (of the masses) and remains somewhat condescending towards the »uneducated people«:

Die Quintessenz der Propaganda muß in der Forderung gipfeln: Sorgt dafür, daß das Publikum in der Gesamtheit immer höhere Ansprüche stellt und geht selbst oft ins Kino, dann wird der Kitsch immer mehr verschwinden. Das Publikum bekommt letzten Endes immer das vorgesetzt, wonach es verlangt.36

Nevertheless, it took until the late-1920s until such a society was realised. Until that time alternative cinema culture was largely dependent on circles close to the communist party. The proximity of the Prometheus to the communist party KPD made their entry into regular cinemas difficult as up to 90% of cinemas were controlled by big cinema chains affiliated with Ufa or Hollywood majors. These cinemas often refused to rent their halls to the communist party or to cultural organisations affiliated with the KPD. Therefore, many of these cinema events with (party-)political ramifications took place either in communal spaces with antiquated equipment or in open-air screenings, contexts which rather supported a distracted manner of reception and spectatorship not favourable for the aesthetic experiments of the avant-garde. In fact, these activities rather tended towards non-fiction material and agit-prop films with a number of Soviet montage films mixed in. In these circles the experimental films from Germany or France were practically never seen.37 It was not until the late-1920s that these efforts would give rise to an audience organisation with a broader basis.

One moment to pinpoint as a decisive event in the slowly emerging force field of alternative cinema culture in Germany was the matinee »Der absolute Film« on 3 and 10 May 1925 (repeated because of the strong interest during the first session as many people had to be turned away).38 The event at the Berlin cinema Ufa-Theater am Kurfürstendamm was organised by the Novembergruppe, an aesthetically minded association of artists with avant-garde leanings, in cooperation with the production company Ufa.39 While the communist-oriented Volksfilmverband was intertwined with the political side of the avant-garde, this event highlights the desire of the avant-garde to be recognised as »legitimate« (i.e. bourgeois) art. Tellingly, the screening did not take place in a working-class neighbourhood nor in the old centre of Berlin, but in the bourgeois and commercial centre of the new West. At the same time this occasion emphasises the links between artistic innovations and the industry and the proximity of the avant-garde to the emerging documentary film. In fact, it was Dr. Edgar Beyfuß as dramaturg of the Ufa-Kulturfilmabteilung (department of educational and documentary films) who introduced the screening. The Kulturfilmabteilung could be described as Ufa’s Research & Development-department which innovated trick effects, camera equipment, shooting techniques and technical inventions. Here, Eggeling and
Richter were able to conduct their first experiments and here some support for the still miniscule movement of the avant-garde cinema could be found. The year before (1924) Beyfuß had published together with A. Kossowsky a book about the emerging field in which documentary, experiment, education and activism overlapped. The Kulturfilmabteilung and initiatives in the same field (cinemas in Germany invariably started their programmes with short educational films in order to obtain tax breaks) which proved to be not only influenced and influential for many of the early activists of the avant-garde movement, but also gave many of these practitioners a chance to try their hand at filmmaking or offered a safe haven and steady source of income for an otherwise often unpredictable future.

Connected to the important matinee »Der absolute Film« and in some respect a continuation of the aesthetic streak was the Gesellschaft Neuer Film (GNF) with Hans Richter as a driving force behind it. The »society new film« presented radical films and was founded officially on 15 January 1928 in Berlin by Hans Richter, Guido Bagier, Karl Freund, and Frank Warschauer. The society only organised two events in Berlin, one privately, »in einem Privathaus des Berliner Westens«, on 15 January 1928 with the premiere of Richter’s own FILMSTUDIE (DE 1926, at this occasion still called »Rhythmus«), Alberto Cavalcanti’s LA P’TITE LILI (FR 1927/28) and Henri Chomette’s JEUX DES REFLETS ET LE LA VITESSE (FR 1925), wrongly attributed to Chomette’s patron Count Beaumont, accompanied by Guido Bagier on the piano. The other screening took place on 19 February 1928 at the commercial cinema U.T. Kurfürstendamm where a similar programme – films by Richter, Beaumont (Henri Chomette’s patron, i.e. most probably again JEUX DES REFLETS ET LE LA VITESSE), Cavalcanti, Eggeling and Man Ray – were shown to an invited audience. Hans Richter himself has later commented on this initiative:


This film programme was subsequently at least screened in Frankfurt, possibly in other provincial cities as well. Hans Richter provided his personal contacts for international links: the Dutch Filmliga mentions the GNF in their report on their international network and activities of the first year. The Gesellschaft »Neuer Film« did not exist for a longer time. Some months later the press was speculating whether the GNF has disbanded: Guido Bagier had in the meantime gone back to his involvement with sound cinema and taken up a job at Tobis while Karl Freund was working in England. In an interview in Close Up Freund hints at
possible tensions within the society around the question of abstraction and realism when asked about the society »that you founded for the absolute film in Berlin«:

There was not sufficient support; we had to give up the performances. Myself, I am a purist, I am not so sure that I like all these absolute films, so many of them are drawing. Film is celluloid coated with silver emulsion, and should be used to record light and shade. I think of all the experimentors I prefer Man Ray.49

Effectively, Hans Richter seems to have been the driving force from the beginning, but with the inactivity of his co-founders and a general uncertainty about the direction to follow, Richter did not act anymore actively on behalf of this film society.

On 13 January 1928 the Volksfilmverband für Filmkunst (VFV – People’s Film Association for Film Art) was officially established in Berlin, trying to bind together antagonistic forces from the left-wing spectrum: communists, anarchists and left-wing social democrats united under the symbolic intellectual head of Heinrich Mann who functioned as the first president of the organisation. The actual day-to-day business was taken care of by journalist Rudolf Schwarzkopf while journalist Franz Höllering (editor in chief of the illustrated left-wing paper Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung) edited the monthly magazine Film und Volk. The VFV assembled a honorary council made up of intellectuals and artists to support and broaden the activities of the society.50 It announced itself to be a non-party organisation, yet their founding manifesto signed by Mann is quite outspoken in political terms:


Gegen den künstlerischen Schund, gegen die geistige Armut und nicht zuletzt auch gegen die politische und soziale Reaktion, die nur allzuoft der heutigen Filmproduktion den Stempel aufdrückt, richtet sich unser Kampf, damit der Film zu dem werde, was er sein könnte und sein sollte: Ein Mittel zur Verbreitung von Wissen, Aufklärung und Bildung, Kenntnissen, Gedanken, Ideen – ein Mittel der Völker-Verständigung und Versöhnung – ein lebendiger, wirkender Faktor des alltäglichen wie des geistigen und künstlerischen Lebens.51

The German context is thus markedly different from the French discourse which revolved around concepts such as photogénie and cinéphilie, it is also unlike the tendency of the Dutch Filmliga towards abstraction; the vast majority of the German initiatives were much higher politicised in that even the most broad approach took a stance against experiments (even if it says »high-flown experiments«). It was also oriented towards entertainment. It should be borne in mind though that the VFV, even though it called itself variably »left-wing« or
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»liberal« was initially not connected to party politics – later it followed increasingly in the wake of the communist party. Two factors might have added to this: Germany’s young republic was highly politicised, especially in its later years; secondly, Germany’s market had probably the strongest competition with Ufa leading the German film against the American imports. With the strongest home industry and as the most important European market, the cinema was caught between issues of foreign and home policy, quotas and contingents, national self-assertion and international claim, the desire to be entertained and the will to be educated. Nevertheless, the Volksfilmverband marks an incisive break with earlier initiatives as intellectuals now joined forces with party functionaries, artist stood shoulder to shoulder with unionists and political, cultural and aesthetic concerns came into congruence. For some months a strategic convergence seemed like it could provide a counterweight to the power of the large corporations from Berlin-Babelsberg and Hollywood. Yet, this short moment of utopian possibility when it seemed that all these different groups had a common aim and a common strategy to follow did not last.

As the Gesellschaft Neuer Film was founded two days after the Volksfilmverband and as the board of the former is hardly ever mentioned in the magazine of the latter, Film und Volk, it is possible that Richter’s initiative was in some respects a reaction to the VFV. Moreover, Walter Ruttmann polemicised against Richter’s newly founded society. Ruttmann made fun of the »absolute fashion«. And indeed, Ruttmann’s name can be found in the honorary council of the VFV while I could find no hint that any of the activists involved with GNF were closely connected to the VFV. Testifying to a rift within the avant-garde between those who would put politics above aesthetics and those for whom aesthetic innovation came before political activity, this incident demonstrates that the superficial unity of the avant-garde presented at occasions such as the La Sarraz meeting or the Stuttgart exhibition were long before the coming of sound already nothing but an illusion in order to forge an alliance at that time. This construction has often been reiterated in retrospective reasoning.

One lesson to learn from the emergence of film societies despite the nationally diverse contexts is that the whole opposition of art against industry was to a large extent publicity, necessary for the avantgarde to mobilise a public. A specific segment of the audience was much easier to animate if gathered against a common enemy; it was rather opposition (to commercial cinema culture, to narrative film, to unpolitical and bourgeois stories) than a common aim that united the activists of the ciné-clubs for some years. Even though most of the films screened in the film societies were also playing in commercial cinemas, even though a lot of the people active in these initiatives worked in and for the industry, even though the film societies could not function without organisational structures similar to those of the industry they were still employing the dichotomy to mark a position. The avant-garde thrived on an imaginary opposition that proved to be also
one of the reasons for its downfall when the internal divisions became visible after some time. The glue that held the film societies together was a vague and sometimes even populist aversion to a certain kind of commercial cinema. Nevertheless, this antipathy was strong enough to create a climate in which many people believed that the cinema was a factor to be reckoned with in drastic and radical socio-political transformations. It was this utopian aspiration that contributed to the strategic convergence of different groups.

3.2 Screening Practice

_The Society is under no illusions. It is well aware that Caligari's do not grow on raspberry bushes, and that it cannot, in a season, expect to provide its members with an unbroken succession of masterpieces._

_The Film Society (1923)_

The screening practice at the Parisian ciné-clubs and specialised theatres was initially rather inspired by notions of film history and classics than animated by ideas of abstract or experimental work. On the one hand very few avant-garde films existed in the first half of the 1920s (the first wave of films now canonised as part of the classical avant-garde was made around 1924), on the other the notion of film art had to be worked through and established. For that reason the early programmes of the French outlets for alternative cinema consisted of Chaplin and Griffith, Feuillade and Sjöström, Stiller and Lang – it was first of all a historical orientation that contributed to the emergence of alternative screening outlets. The ciné-clubs on the whole remained high-brow and elitist. With the notable exception of Moussinac’s _Les amis de Spartacus_ in 1928 (to be discussed below), most of the events were made by and for a bourgeois intellectual public. The rhetoric of the clubs claiming that transforming the audience’s taste would necessarily lead to a change in film production was therefore not utterly convincing as they invariably reached only a small segment of the audience (that would often not go to the cinema otherwise). The charge of elitism remained a perennial problem of the avant-garde as their audience was a segment that did not need to be won over – more often than not, audience organisations from the avant-garde were preaching to the converted. Another problem was the import restrictions and quotas put down by the French legislation in order to protect the domestic industry: in 1928 quota laws endangered the Parisian specialised cinemas because foreign films no longer could be exhibited and the cinemas banded together to be exempted from this law.

The _Film Society_ in London, most probably the longest-living audience organisation in interwar Europe, was active for 14 seasons (1925–39) with normally eight events per year (only six performances during the last two seasons), showing approximately 500 short and feature-length films in a total of 108
performances. The first 4 seasons were presented at the New Gallery, the screenings then moved to the Tivoli in 1929, and back to the New Gallery after 6 seasons in 1935 for the last 4 seasons.\(^{58}\) The successive moves testify to the growing popularity in 1929 (the auditorium of the Tivoli was considerable larger) and the later decline of spectator numbers. Of the films screened by the *Film Society* 23% were of British origin, 20% came from France and from Germany each, 15% were American, and 7.5% were Soviet. A bit more than half of the presented films were silents (263 films), the other half was sound films (237 films); the majority of films had not been shown before in England (312 films), while many shorts (137) were revivals, mostly comedy classics (Chaplin, slapstick). Sound was obviously no reason for the downfall of the society as enough films could be found during the 1930s that were suitable for screening. The Film Society was ultimately a bourgeois club as the membership fee (twenty-five shillings per season) was too high for workers.\(^{59}\) The first programme on October 1925 demonstrates quite well the variety of interests in the *Film Society*: This mix of films is typical for the audience organisations of these years, ranging from commercial art cinema with Paul Leni’s *WACHSFIGURENKABINETT* (DE 1923) – often presented as reprises, thus pointing forward to the construction of a canon of classical works and the repertory cinema movement – to abstract films with Walter Ruttmann’s *LICHTSPIELOPUS* 2, 3, 4 (DE 1919-25), from the ever-popular Chaplin (*CHAMPION CHARLIE*, US 1916) and local heroes (Adrian Brunel’s *TYPICAL BUDGET*, GB 1925) to pre-war Westerns (*HOW BRONCHO BILLY LEFT BEAR COUNTRY*, US 1912). Whereas some of the radical manifestoes read as if purely abstract, »absolute« films were the sole diet, in fact the programmes were very much mixed in order to cater to the audience that was similarly diversified.

The *Film Society* of London was quite decidedly unpolitical. This stance can be gleaned from their programme notes: In the introduction to *POTEMKIN* no explicit mention is made of revolution while censorship problems in the United States are allegedly motivated by the depiction of »several details of barbaric violence« and the innovation of the film is seen in its »incitement to hysteria by means of rhythmic cutting«. Dziga Vertov’s *TRI PESNI O LENIN* (SU 1934) is praised as an »emotional document of biography«.\(^{60}\) The Society aimed at influencing future productions, improving or educating the industry (this educational idea would a few years later inspire the *British Film Institute*) while the industry in turn felt threatened. Yet, individuals who worked in the industry supported the actions of the Film Society either openly or secretly. Activities of the industry and the avant-garde were not taking place in completely different and unconnected realms, but they were aware of each other, sometimes working with each other, sometimes locked together in a dialectical relationship. In this respect, the term »alternative cinema culture« might be misleading as it is implying an alternative to the conventional film industry. While film societies and avant-garde circles were in some ways proposing an alternative way of spectatorship, a
different way of conceptualising the relationship between film and audience, there remained a lot of overlap between these two realms.

It is only retrospectively that the film societies and the avant-garde have been purified and reduced to a handful of formal experiments. Whereas today's list of avant-garde classics is short and could be squeezed into 3 or 4 evenings of film presentation (and indeed often is at cinémathèques and film museums), the film societies presented periodically programmes taking place regularly (normally once every month) over years. Thus, it was a necessity to resort to »commercial art cinema«, old Chaplin-films, documentary, scientific or educational film. Film societies had basically three options for putting a programme together: Either they could only meet at irregular intervals (whenever new films were available) or they had to resort to older films which had been shown before. A third option was the programming policy of the Dutch *Filmliga* which had a didactic approach to programming with screening bits and pieces from older films in order to demonstrate specific points. While the first option led almost invariably to a process of disintegration, the second was the most common option, yet it had the side effect of blurring the initial opposition to ordinary cinema culture. This tendency led to an overlap with commercial cinemas and finally to art cinemas which took away the more lucrative films from the screening clubs. The choice of the *Filmliga* was only possible with a strong board pushing through their agenda.

Another criticism to the film societies has been put forward by British film critic C.J. Lejeune: She rejected film societies because she claimed that instead of closed circuits one should try to bring the interesting films to conventional cinemas. Lejeune thus objected to the creation of a closed-off ghetto for film art with a very limited public. Instead she proposed to address the whole audience and not just a small and intellectual part, turning many of the societies effectively into elite clubs. Retrospectively, Ivor Montagu of the *Film Society* in London agreed with her, but pointed out that one had to take every small opportunity at the time. Another criticism was directed against the unpolitical stance of many of the clubs. In many countries political film organisations were founded as the result. For example, the apolitical nature of the London Film Society partly motivated the founding of the *Progressive Film Society* with a more outspoken political agenda. A similar move can be discerned in France where the immensely successful *Ciné-club Les amis de Spartacus* under the leadership of Léon Moussinac was having its success as a decidedly political (read: communist) association. The *amis de Spartacus* thus operated in opposition to the majority of ciné-clubs in France. The seeds for the diversification in the 1930s were already planted in the late 1920s – those different groups that gathered under the avant-garde banner could only be kept together for a limited period of time.

The Dutch *Filmliga* had perhaps one of the most regulatory board of directors of international film societies: Older, pre-war films were combined with avant-garde classics, but also with quality art films to prove the superiority of
abstract film art. The main proponent of this educational programming policy seems to have been Menno ter Braak who put his theoretical convictions down in a book of film theory entitled consequently »Militant Cinema« and published in the key year 1929. The main asset of the Filmliga was the sheer variety of different films. The aim of this policy was manifold: On the one hand, spectators should learn to recognise the »superior quality« of avant-garde cinema; for that reason sometimes sequences from commercial feature films were presented, discussed and commented upon. Comparing and contrasting were according to Gunning the key ingredients of the Filmliga-programming. Furthermore, Amsterdam presented many films that are by now classics of art cinema: F.W. Murnau’s NOSFERATU (DE 1921), C.T. Dreyer’s LA PASSION DE JEANNE D’ARC (FR 1928), or Russian montage films.

The German context was characterised by political fights, but also by frictions with the commercial film industry. Already the first event organised by the Volksfilmverband ran into difficulties when the film industry put pressure on the director of the meeting place, the Berlin cinema Capitol, to resign (which he did not) in order to stop the VFV from their first public outing. This event on 26 February 1928 boasted two programmatic addresses by Heinrich Mann and Béla Balázs, a montage of snippets from newsreels and features entitled WAS WIR WOLLEN – WAS WIR NICHT WOLLEN (DE 1928, Béla Balázs, Albrecht Viktor Blum). A short film by Ernst Angel and Albrecht Viktor Blum, ZEITBERICH T – ZEITGESICHT (DE 1928), was stopped by censorship. The main feature of the evening was Vsevolod Pudovkin’s KONEC SANKT-PETERBURGA (SU 1926). The initial planning called for regional differentiation with the German capital as the figure head: In Berlin, a cinema should be acquired for premieres already before autumn of 1928, a plan that did not come to fruition. Some reports written by Rudolf Schwarzkopf, secretary of the German Volksfilmverband, bear further witness to difficulties faced by this film society. An event in the spring of 1928, only shortly after the founding of the organisation, was scheduled to feature G.W. Pabst as a speaker on censorship followed by a screening of his DIE LIEBE DER JEANNE NEY (DE 1927). Yet, the film industry was able to block the screening of the film which was not yet »abgespielt«, i.e. it was still being shown in a considerable number of commercial cinemas. Even though Pabst supported the screening of his film and gave a lecture, the organisers were not able to obtain the film for a presentation and had to show another feature instead. Quite ironically, Pabst found himself some years later in the juridical argument around the adaptation of DIE 3-GROSCHEN-OPER (DE 1930), more or less on the other side of this debate. As the film producers and distributors owned the rights to the films legally, even the directors were powerless against the copyright held by the industrialists. This incident also demonstrated that the industry perceived the film societies as a threat to their domination of the film market. After this experience, the organisers chose to change their tactics: neither press nor industry were...
informed about the screening of Eisenstein OKTIABR’ (SU 1927) in order to avoid »unangenehme und schädliche Polemik. [...] Überhaupt wollen wir in nächster Zeit mehr im stillen werben und wirken, und erst an die breite Öffentlichkeit herantreten, wenn unsere Vorbereitungen entsprechend weit gediehen sein werden.«

As the industry lobby proved to be very strong in Germany, the Volksfilmverband decided to start by building up an organisation more or less secretly before facing the confrontation with the strong industrialists. Distributors, producers and cinema owners alike attempted to block activities of the institution: the society publicly complained about (politically motivated) unfair prices and behaviour by various cinema owners in medium-sized German cities which forced the VFV to switch to multi-purpose spaces in pubs, restaurants or union halls.

Wherever possible the Volksfilmverband asked artists and technicians involved in the production to give an introduction to their films. Moreover, the didactic technique of showing extracts from different films appears to have been widespread. The difference is crucial: while screening films in its entirety meant a focus on the aesthetic value of the work as a whole, the presentation of clips put the focus strongly on education because these parts needed presentations and explanations, both regarding their placement within the wider context of the film and concerning the question why they had been selected for screening. A typical programme would look like this: »Gut gewählte und geschnittene Teile« from three films directed by Vsevolod Pudovkin, MATJ (SU 1926), KONEC SANKT-PETERSBURGA (SU 1926), POTOMOK CINGIS-HANA (SU 1928), and parts of ZEMLJA W PLENU (SU 1928, Fedor Ozep). Not only Pudovkin attended the screening, but also Ozep, MATJ-actress Vera Baranovskai a and cameraman Anatoli Golownja.

Less than three weeks later, the same organisation presented at the same cinema a programme of educational and scientific films (Kulturfilme), selected and introduced by Dr. Edgar Beyfuß who worked for the Ufa at the time. According to contemporary sources the programme attempted to give the audience an overview of film production: »dem Publikum einen Einblick in die so vielseitige Materie der Filmherstellung zu geben«. The main feature, DIE WUNDER DES FILMS (DE 1928, Edgar Beyfuß), consists of three parts: it first shows how travelogues are being made, next the problems faced when making animal documentaries and the third part deals with trick technique within educational cinema. Aesthetic appreciation and artistic innovation takes second position behind the educational impetus of the film programmes. Especially the politically motivated institutions, often aimed at the working class, gravitated towards a didactic and educational approach. The implicit model here is cinema as a means of teaching, yet again in an avant-garde logic these two elements are inseparably intertwined. The aesthetically motivated societies by contrast, usually with a bourgeois audience, were oriented towards the artistic value of works of art and their model was the gallery or the museum. Consequently, the film is either a tool
for understanding the world differently or it is an end in itself when contemplated in the disinterested mode of art appreciation.

3.3 Peak Years 1928–1931

While the movement of film societies evolved slowly but steadily over the 1920s there was a sudden upsurge and boom of film societies in the time between 1928 and 1931 followed by a slow tapering off of activities, interest, and attendance over the course of the 1930s. Despite a still large amount of activity as well as a continuous high number of screenings a steep drop in visibility and public interest characterises the early 1930s which continued, albeit in a slower form, all through the 1930s. After looking at the years in which the interest peaked I will turn in the next parts to sectors such as archiving and film in national life where some of the avant-garde energy migrated and proliferated in the course of the 1930s. In keeping with the metaphor of the network, my focus will be on the flow and distribution of energy: around 1929/30 the film avant-garde generated support, interest and, from those that felt threatened by a possible changing status quo, hostility. For a brief moment the cinema became the rallying point for those interested in political, social and cultural transformations through the means of modern media.

With the boom of film societies, France again led the way with Léon Moussinac’s organisation Les amis de Spartacus which was only active for eight months from March to November 1928. The organisation managed to gather an impressive number of members, something in between 8,000 and 80,000 across the whole of France. Moussinac himself reports of 20,000 subscribers in the capital alone. The club was able to achieve its explosive growth because of a clear profile – Les amis de Spartacus concentrated on exhibiting Soviet films prohibited by French censorship – and good promotion work with press screenings and publicity. Even though their agenda was political and revolutionary, their approach was democratic (i.e. decidedly anti-elitist) and they wanted to show »tous les films, nouveaux ou anciens, interdits ou non, exprimant des beautés ou des vérités techniques, artistiques, idéologiques ou éducatives«. The subscription price was 5 francs per month and the first session took place on 12 April 1928 with the documentary LA VIE SOUS-MARINE (FR 1927, Jean Painlevé) and Sergei Eisenstein’s BRONENOSEZ »POTEMKIN« (SU 1925). Retrospective reasoning disagrees whether the club’s activities were discontinued for political (anti-communist) or for economic reasons (pressure of cinema owners and film distributors who feared the powerful competition). In any case, Paris’ infamous chief of police, Jean Chiappe, prohibited further activities. Possibly, both economic
and political fears contributed to the mounting pressure on the decision makers that eventually led to the closure of *Les amis de Spartacus*. At the time, conservative politicians were worried about communist activities which were being combated with great force in France and the film industry feared that a new competitor would grow too large, thus starting to be a real threat. Similar incidents of exhibitors putting pressure on film societies were known from Berlin and Zürich: as already mentioned, Pabst was on one occasion not able to present his own film because the distributor owning the rights would not give him clearance while in Switzerland cinema owners used their monopoly over screening spaces to form a trust and block out events organised by alternative organisations for fear of losing audience to these organisations (see below). The industry seems to have grown wary and anxious of alternative cinema circuits by the end of the 1920s in France, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands and England. As long as the film societies were small circles of artists and intellectuals they did not pose any danger politically or economically, but on the verge of a mass movement the conservative powers grew wary of their forces. The conservative fear of masses as susceptible to influence by mass media as well as the economic danger of a rising competitor contributed to the problems faced by film societies.

One of the clearest signs of the success of the movement – the installation of permanent exhibition outlets and specialised cinemas in Paris, London, Amsterdam, Berlin and other places – illustrates the flip side of success: how a movement was partly brought down by its own achievements. The three Parisian pioneers, *Vieux Colombier, Studio des Ursulines* and *Studio 28*, proved to be so successful that they either opened secondary houses for outsourcing their programmes – like Jean Tedesco who repeated the programmes from the *Vieux Colombier* at the *Pavillon du cinéma* from early 1927 to the summer of 1928⁷⁸ – or that they motivated outsiders to start their own repertory cinema like the *Ciné-Latin*, the *Salle des Agriculteurs*, *L’Oeil de Paris* or the *Studio Diamant*. Contrary to Richard Abel’s claim that »[o]f the specialized cinemas, only two survived beyond 1930«⁷⁹, a second boom of repertory cinemas is detectable in the early 1930s. Indeed, there was a short drop in specialised cinemas in early 1930, yet already later that year, in October 1930, the new *Studio de Paris* opened in Montparnasse with a repertory programme.⁸⁰ Due to a change in legislation which allowed the presentation of foreign films outside the strict quota laws if no more than five Parisian and provincial cinemas were screening them, avant-garde cinemas again multiplied in the early 1930s. This led to another crisis in the winter of 1932 when no less than 17 cinemas were screening films under the label »avant-garde«. Mostly, these cinemas screened original (sound) versions of foreign films and foreshadowed today’s practice in which some Parisian cinemas present original versions, the others dubbed in French.⁸¹ By early 1933 a number of those specialised exhibition outlets had already closed down due to lack of suitable films and overscreening.⁸²
England had a veritable boom of film societies in 1929: The Film Society of London was initially presenting films at the New Gallery, an auditorium counting 1,400 seats; in November 1929 the Society moved to the Tivoli, seating 2,000–3,000 spectators, because the number of members had increased dramatically and could not be fitted into the original venue. Further societies in Edinburgh, Yorkshire, and Glasgow were also founded that year. On the local level there were a number of other film societies at the time. On 28 October 1929 the London Workers’ Film Society was founded in London, screening on its first gathering Victor Turin’s TURKSIB (SU 1929), the English version was translated and prepared by John Grierson, a pivotal figure between avant-garde, documentary and political lobby work. The organisation quickly spread throughout the country with local chapters in Liverpool, Manchester, Edinburgh and other places. In fact, a Federation of Workers’ Film Societies had been set up simultaneously with the London chapter, so a nation-wide network was conceptualised from the beginning. Quite different from the humble beginnings with local networks of acquaintances and friends gathering, by 1929 organisations were starting off on the national level. The Federation was offering advice for founding and running a society, it provided films and legal assistance. The Film Society was considered by contemporary left-wing activists as too bourgeois, stuffy and politically conservative as it attracted mainly affluent intellectuals and wealthy liberals. Moreover, the membership fee was so high as to practically exclude workers. As a result the Film Society had an exclusively bourgeois-intellectual membership base, a fact not lost on contemporary observers on the other side of the divide. When workers’ clubs wanted to screen Soviet revolutionary cinema, they were not allowed to, yet the Film Society got permission as the censorship board considered the audience less dangerous and less inclined to be overwhelmed by the revolutionary message. This fairly straight and incisive division between a aesthetically minded and bourgeois Film Society preoccupied with film as art and a politically oriented Workers’ Film Society interested in film as a political weapon was strongest in England. Perhaps it is this strong demarcation line that led Peter Wollen to propose the, in my opinion, problematic notions of »two avant-gardes«, one formalist-aesthetic and one political-radical. This distinction could possibly be argued for England, but it breaks down when transferred to France, the Netherlands, Germany or the Soviet Union. Even in England, an individual like Ivor Montagu could easily cross the lines between aesthetic and political transformation, further putting this distinction into doubt.

The Workers’ Film Society was close to worker’s associations and party politics, similar to the situation in Germany. Indeed, the Federation and its activities could have been modelled on the VFV and the French equivalent Les amis de Spartacus. In September 1930 chapters were active in London, Bradford, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester/Salford, Cardiff and Liverpool. As class divisions and censorship was especially strong in England, the society ran into
constant trouble with renting cinemas as well as with booking film. Like *Les amis de Spartacus* a film club geared towards a working class audience was deemed much more dangerous than a bourgeois association primarily interested in film art. Another initiative was the *Progressive Film Institute* which was a commercial organisation occupied with political cinema. The *PFI* was not a film society in the strictest sense (it was not an audience institution gathering members for film screenings), but rather a company active in the alternative sector which ventured into production and developed a distribution organisation in the 1930s, parallel with *Kino*, a commercial distributor specialising in Soviet films and working almost exclusively in 16mm. The *PFI* was mainly directed against the *Film Society* and the *British Film Institute* which was beginning to soak up much energy by the early to mid-1930s while the London Film Society had coagulated into a wholly bourgeois club for screening »quality art« film. The *PFI* also ventured into production and is in some respects rather related to the cinema practice of Münzenberg’s media empire or the French *front populaire* than to the film club-movement of the 1920s. The board of directors was made up of »[m]ensen, die aktief waren in wat men de Volksfrontbeweging kan noemen: in akties tegen Hitler, tegen Franco, voor het Vredesfront, voordat de oorlog begon.« By the mid-1930s film had been accepted in wide circles as a respected cultural and artistic form as well as an important medium for propaganda. Consequently, cinema would take an important position in political activism as the fight for the recognition of film had been won already.

A telling incident is Ivor Montagu’s resignation from the council of the *Film Society* in November 1929: The driving force behind the emergence of this organisation had in the meantime become involved in the *Workers’ Film Society* and he felt that these two engagements could or would lead to a clash of interests. Montagu later also became a key figure in the activities of the *PFI*. By 1929, in England the rift between an aesthetic and bourgeois institution like the *Film Society* which aimed at »influencing future productions« (reformist in a way similar to Grierson’s filmmaking practice) and an openly political and activist film association had become glaringly obvious. The aporias of the avant-gardes broke into the open: Is film first and foremost an art form or a political instrument, is it moving towards abstraction and technical study or towards engagement and agitation? While I the notion of »two avant-gardes« is too rigid and strict because there never was a clear line to draw between the two, it is interesting to note that this division between a political left and an aesthetic left was openly played out in the German magazine *Filmkritik* in the 1960s or between *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Positif*. The postwar cinephiles (*Filmkritik* was the closest Germany ever got to an equivalent of *Cahiers du cinéma*) replayed an opposition and debate that could be traced back to the 1920s and 1930s, yet that only emerged forcefully after the Second World War.
Convergence and Differentiation

Whereas the British situation was characterised by divisions and rifts into many different groups and interests, the Netherlands in contrast showed a more unified image with the Filmliga giving a frame and context to most alternative cinema events. In fact, this had its advantages – being able to work from a steady base with at least some security provided by the good organisation – but also its drawbacks – the opinion of the Amsterdam board clashed several times with local chapters who were less »pure« and more inclined towards »quality entertainment« or »art cinema«. The screening context of the Filmliga modelled itself on a laboratory with the films as the experiments. While in France a passionate cinephilia gave room for subjective and irrational affection for obscure objects the Filmliga was very sober in its chosen objects of worship. Menno ter Braak as the ideological head of the Filmliga and as the most outspoken and rhetorically versed proponent of formal experiments and abstractions influenced the screening policy considerably. By 1929, the Filmliga had grown into a nation-wide organisation with 9 departments in different cities, touring that year with 8 large film programmes from city to city, publishing a monthly film magazine, and inviting famous guests from abroad (in 1929 and 1930 the guests were: René Clair, Jean Mauclair of Studio 28 in Paris, Sergei Eisenstein, Hans Richter, Charles Dekeukelaire).

Audience organisations, specialised cinemas, distribution circuits, publication to back up the various activities, meetings and conferences among the key players – a veritable network to support the avant-garde was in place. In 1929, on 9 November, the Filmliga opened a cinema of their own in Amsterdam: De Uitkijk which was modelled on the three Parisian precursors, the Vieux Colombier, the Studio des Ursulines, and the Studio 28. For the opening show in De Uitkijk Joris Ivens’ short film HEIEN (NL 1929) was followed by Carl Theodor Dreyer’s LA PASSION DE JEANNE D’ARC (FR 1928). The cinema Die Kamera was opened in Berlin at the boulevard Unter den Linden the same year, as the fifth art house or avant-garde theatre in Europe. For a while the Kamera was partly state-funded with subsidies from the city, the radio association and the cultural ministry, but the ambitious plans failed in 1932.93

In Germany, the Volksfilmverband evolved quickly into a mass organisation: In March 1928, one month after its official inauguration, the association already boasted more than 30 payment offices in the capital Berlin alone where members could acquire tickets or the magazine Film und Volk. Divisions of the society were active in Hamburg and Frankfurt while chapters in Dresden, Leipzig and Breslau (today: Wroclaw) were in the process of being founded. The organisation concentrated on recruiting members in large companies among the working class where sympathisers should be installed as go-betweens who would then promote actively the membership in these organisations. This methods was close to political party-work or to trade union activities, again pointing to the proximity of the initiatives in Germany to party politics. Further plans of the VFV include open-air
screenings in the boroughs of Wedding and Friedrichshain, traditional living quarters of the working class in Berlin. In the end of 1929, the Volksfilmverband für Filmkunst boasted impressive numbers: it had evolved into 14 groups in Berlin (with 62 payment offices) and 33 in other cities. 6000 members were listed for Berlin, 1500 in Hamburg, 3000 in Breslau and chapters in Dresden, Leipzig, Munich, Nürnberg, Erfurt, Chemnitz, Offenbach, Frankfurt, and other cities. In November 1929 a report stated that the VFV had organised 730 film evenings during the year in different parts of the country and that 32 film programmes were at that time on tour through different cities and regions throughout Germany. While initial plans had called for running its own cinemas, just like the Filmliga did in Amsterdam with De Uitkijk, the trajectory and aim had changed:

Keine hochtrabenden Produktionspläne – sondern
Umstellung
auf praktisch realisierbare Pläne,
Verstärkung der Arbeit unter den werktätigen Filmfreunden,
aktiverer Kampf gegen Filmreaktion und Filmschund, die gerade jetzt in
Hochkunjunktur stehen.  

This shift of focus, away from the initial drive towards vertical integration and instead oriented towards a more direct political engagement with the film industry characterises the development of the VFV in the few years of its existence. Understood as an abandonment of avant-garde ideals this move supported the growing influence of the political battles of the late Weimar Republic. The cinema was increasingly functionalised in this conflict. The publication organ of the institution was a monthly magazine entitled Film und Volk which only survived 2 years before fusing with the left-wing theatre magazine Arbeiterbühne in 1930 to become Arbeiterbühne und Film; publication of this new combined magazine ended already a year later in 1931 due to economic problems. In 1931 the VFV joined the communist Interessensgemeinschaft für Arbeiterkultur (IfA – Interest group for workers’ culture), a cultural umbrella organisation under the direct influence of the KPD, thus giving up its independent status. It appears as if the bigger organisation IfA swallowed the VFV, due possibly to in-fighting within the communist party about the strategy to follow and the general strategies advanced by the ComIntern. Some local chapters of the VFV were active even after the official merger such as the group around Willi Bredel in Hamburg while Friedrich Wolf kept a communist-oriented film society going until the winter of 1932/33 in Stuttgart when he had to flee Germany and went to Moscow for exile.

Attempts to stimulate grass-roots activities (discussions of films, amateur film production) came fairly late in Germany and their success has to be gauged ambivalently. The Volksfilmverband was on the one hand very successful as it could build upon a solid organisational base within the communist party and its
numerous affiliations and association in its vicinity. On the other hand, this proximity to party politics also proved to be a problem as the VFV was far too much entangled in ideological battles to be able to form a real group feeling beyond its political objectives such as the Filmliga in the Netherlands. For example, the VFV agitated against LOHNBUCHHALTER KREMKE (DE 1930, Marie Harder) and other films produced by the socialdemocratic party SPD instead of trying to integrate all reform-oriented left-wing forces like it was later done by the French *front populaire*. The VFV thus followed strictly the course laid out by the communist international which had in the early 1930s identified the social democrats as its main enemy and competitor. Likewise, the socialdemocrats, led by their newspaper *Vorwärts*, agitated against the Volksfilmverband arguing that it was a communist organisation disguised as a cultural institution above party politics. The direction within the organisation appears to have been contradictory at first. In the same issue of the magazine *Film und Volk* in March/April 1928 two articles argue for a contrary position vis-à-vis the social democrats. Arthur Hollitscher describes the evolution of the VFV and polemicates against socialdemocrats and trade unions when he recalls meetings with them: »...ja es kam sogar gelegentlich zu gemeinsamen Beratungen mit den Vertretern der Gewerkschaften und der Bildungsausschüsse der SPD. – bald aber versank alles im bewußten lethargischen Schlaf...«. In the same issue Heinrich Mann, the president of the society, took a different stance and argued in favour of a popular front in the cinema sector:

Der 'Volksverband für Filmkunst' ist links gerichtet, aber parteipolitisch neutral. Er will die Volksbewegung gegen den schlechten, unwahren und reaktionären Film zusammenfassen. Diese Volksbewegung schließt alle fortschrittlichen Elemente ein, einerlei welcher politischen Partei sie angehören.

This tension between a popular front and the conscious intensification of the conflict between communists and socialdemocrats characterised the organisation in its few years of existence. Even a liberal trade paper like the Film-Kurier voiced its scepticism that the VFV was either a camouflage organisation of the communists or run by untalented and embittered screenwriters eager to take revenge on their more successful colleagues.

The original plans of the VFV – like most of the audience organisations – pointed towards vertical integration: The plan amounted to nothing less than a regular production of films, the acquisition of first-run houses, the installation of a distribution network with a pre-existing audience as subscribers and/or members, all supported by publications and regular public events. In practice, the main activity remained the publication of a magazine and the setting up of film programmes which would then tour through local chapters. Often, these screenings were related to political campaigns and topics of the day such as the collecting of money for the Soviet workers in 1924/25 undertaken by the IAH or the strike
against the building of battleships in autumn 1928. Yet, a summary report on the history of the VFV from an official socialist point-of-view (written in East Germany) gives the organisation as the model of a popular cultural front:


While this might have been true for the first months of the organisation, as time went by in the 1930s the VFV became more and more an instrument in the hands of the Comintern, when the cinema was subordinated to politics. Further evidence suggests that a cinema in the center of Berlin screened »proletarian« films at least for some months in the summer of 1932, named adequately the Dreigroschenkino. Yet, it remains unclear if this cinema was in any way related to the VFV.

In Germany, besides the political initiatives from the left, a number of associations were active around 1930, the most important of which was the Deutsche Liga für den unabhängigen Film (»German League for Independent Film«) which was rallying on behalf of independent films and censored film. The association was founded on 14 May 1930 by Hans Richter, Mies van der Rohe, Asta Nielsen, Lotte Reiniger, Walter Ruttmann, Hans Feld, Paul Hindemith and others. On the surface its ideas were quite similar to that of the Volksfilmverband, yet it was further removed from party politics and run by artists and intellectuals (with a socialist, communist or broadly liberal orientation nevertheless). This association linked itself to ideas from the La Sarraz meeting where the establishment of a transnational network of film clubs was planned, turning the Deutsche Liga effectively into the German branch of the La Sarraz-network, presenting film programmes in some German cities. At least six German cities had local groups: Berlin, Munich, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Essen, Hannover. At the conference in La Sarraz it was decided to form such a network took place in September 1929 while the founding meeting in Berlin took place 8 months later, in May 1930. Why it took such a long time for the German branch even to come into existence is not clear from available source material. The first trace of activities is to be found in Munich where the institution of a local chapter is inaugurated on 22 May 1930 with a lecture by Hans Richter and the screening of short films. The first public activity of the Deutsche Liga in the German capital seems to have taken place another five months later and more than a year after La Sarraz, on 16 November 1930 at the Rote Mühle in Berlin-Halensee. While the VFV concentrated its activities on the Eastern boroughs with a largely working class
population (Neukölln, Wedding, Kreuzberg, Friedrichshain), the Deutsche Liga chose the rather ritzy and bourgeois Berlin West. After a programmatic statement by Richter who asked for the activation of the audience in order to support the production of a different kind of film the main part of the evening was devoted to talks by Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Weill and their lawyer Otto Joseph about the 3-GROSCHEN-OPER. In the second half of this first event Man Ray’s L’ETOILE DE MER (FR 1928) and three acts of Dovzenko’s ZEMLJA (SU 1930, EARTH) were screened. The Deutsche Liga was more aesthetically oriented and minded than the VFV which had a clear political agenda – Man Ray’s surrealist film would have not interested the communist-oriented association and even Dovzenko is probably the least outspokenly political filmmaker from the Soviet innovators. Announcements for further events were made: a debate between Richter and Asta Nielsen on the role of acting and montage in cinema and the screening of MEHANIKA GOLOVNOGO MOZGA (SU 1925, Vsevolod Pudovkin). Yet, even the society had a broad aesthetic orientation political issues intervened here, as is already visible in the fight of Brecht and Weill against the production company Nero over the ownership of a mass produced cultural commodity such as the film based upon Brecht’s and Weill’s play. On the other side of the rift were not captains of industry, but two intellectuals and film artists who were also considered to be left-wing: the scriptwriter Bela “Batósz and the director G.W. Pabst. The association had segments in other places as well, Liga-programmes were seen at least in Frankfurt/Main and Breslau (today: Wroclaw). Thomas Tode claims that the Liga developed towards vertical integration: »in kleinem Rahmen entwickelt sie sich zu einer kritischen Besucherorganisation mit intelligenten Programmen und einem bescheidenen Vertriebssystem mit Ligafilmen«, yet few traces remain of the activities of the association outside Berlin.

Another related project materialised in Frankfurt: The Bund Das Neue Frankfurt was founded as a progressive artistic-political union of artists and craftsmen (architects, writers, visuals artists). Avant-gardistically minded intellectuals like city planner Ernst May and architect Mart Stam were involved, in charge of the film programmes was from 1931 onwards Ella Bergmann-Michel resulting in her own film work (5 films between 1931 and 1933). The enterprise had begun as Arbeitgemeinschaft für Unabhängigen Film on 26 March 1931 forming a part of the Liga für Unabhängigen Film and thus linked to the La Sarraz-impulse as well. Actually, Bergmann-Michel’s continuation of this film-club work after World War Two was an important impulse for the film culture of Frankfurt. There are also indications that Frankfurt was the second German city to boast a cinema specialised in avant-garde and independent films: the Kurbel which opened on 26 November 1931 was affiliated with the Berlin Kamera. It was planned to screen classics from the repertory, new avant-garde films and act as the homebase for the film club with lecturers and discussions. Thomas Elsaesser has analysed the architectural films developed within the context of the Bund Das neue.
Frankfurt as being just one element of a *Medienverbund* — only in connection to the whole of the activities do the films make sense, considering them without any connection to the overall strategy employed in order to win a public over would rob them of the context necessary for understanding them.

Frankfurt had many connections to the Soviet Union: Not only did Ernst May leave Frankfurt for Magnigotorsk in 1931, but also Soviet filmmakers visited the film club several times. Dziga Vertov paid a visit to the Frankfurt film club on 23 June 1929 showing *CELOVEK S KINOAPPARATOM* (SU 1929). Vertov was on his way to the Werkbund-exhibition in Stuttgart as the Soviet delegate. Plans for a Vertov film in Frankfurt on new architecture (especially flats for workers) were discussed during his stay but do not come to fruition; yet, Ella Bergmann-Michel made photographic studies to prepare the project. On 3 May 1931 Joris Ivens presented *REGEN* (NL 1929) and *ZUIDERSEE* (NL 1930) in Frankfurt; it is Ivens who suggested to Ella Bergmann-Michel to buy a used Kinamo-handcamera from Clairenore Stinnes which she had used for her film tour around the world. This tour resulted in her film *CLAIRENORE STINNES - IM AUTO DURCH ZWEI WELTEN* (DE 1929). Vertov returned to Frankfurt on 4 October 1931 with *ENTUZIJASZM* on his second European tour. The next matinee took place on 15 November 1931 with Jean Dréville’s *AUTOUR DE L’ARGENT* (FR 1928), Germaine Dulac’s *LA COQUILLE ET LE CLERGYMAN* (FR 1927), Alberto Cavalcanti’s *LA P’TITE LILIE* (FR 1927/28), and two Hans Richter films, *ALLES DREHT SICH, ALLES BEWEGT SICH* (DE 1929) and *HÜTE FLIEGEN* (DE 1927/28; commonly known as VORMITTAGSSPUK). Furthermore, the Frankfurt group held soirées with talks of important figures on documentary film or »quality film«, but also famous guests like Rudolf Arnheim or Guido Bagier.

In all of these developments in different centers across Western Europe some factors deserve attention: the films had to be available, the chance to watch older films had to be given in order for a film culture to evolve. Unlike books which are more easily accessible, mobile and reproducible, film in its material form as a conveyor of visual information was quite impractical. A film is expensive to reproduce and to move physically and it is prone to damage and destruction when used. For big commercial films with dozens or even hundreds of existing copies this potential threat did not matter much, yet for an avant-garde film of which often only one or two copies were in existence the possibility of damage and destruction was serious. The proliferation of Soviet trade agencies, backlists of distributors, directors travelling with their personal print of a film to introduce it led to a higher visibility and circulation of film art that seemed to have acquired a critical mass by 1929. The late 1920s had seen an ever increasing mobility in most sectors of society; for the film societies it meant that distribution of films increased and that a number of filmmakers would travel to major cities, lecture, present films, take part in promotional activity and maybe even shoot films abroad. The apotheosis of these grand tours is Sergei Eisenstein’s extended voyage to Europe.
and the US in the early 1930s. The Soviet film had enjoyed an unprecedented success all over Western Europe in the second half of the 1920s and was a decisive influence on the initiatives mentioned here. In these years, through international exchange and travel the small group of famous avant-garde filmmakers (one could even speak of a star system here) would make and present films basically where they wanted to. Invariably they were asked to do industrial films on symbols of a modernisation process (travel, technology, medicine, modern factories).

Another sign of the growing success and proliferation of bottom-up screening organisations can be seen in different manuals and how-to-guides to filmmaking. In one of the central organs of the film avant-garde, Close Up, Winifred Bryher ran a loose series of articles giving hints and ideas how one could improve the standard of the local cinema programme, start a film society, obtain films, attract like-minded cinéphiles, and in general support independent cinema. In Germany, the bottom-up theatre society Volksbühne published a manual on running a film club. Moreover, in many of the forums and magazines of the avant-garde one can find advertisements not only by distributors, but also increasingly by hardware manufacturers for projectors and cameras as the film societies were discovered as a niche market that nevertheless had reached a considerable size around 1930.

Even though I have concentrated on »the cities of modernism« with the nodes Amsterdam / Rotterdam, Berlin, London, and Paris, a couple of other places also deserve mention because similar patterns of emergence and development can also be found for other European countries. My concentration on a Western European context results from the fact that the activities were most intense here, that cooperation was strongest and that the core of the European film avant-garde of the 1920s operated within the major metropolitan centres like Paris, Berlin, London, and Amsterdam / Rotterdam. Thus, passing over more peripheral places should not imply that they do not have significance, but it rather means that for reasons of space and time I have consciously limited myself to central nodes. In fact, the periphery has a similar development to the one sketched here, yet on the whole less intense.

Belgium followed the examples set in the French periphery and its network became a part of the French circles. The critic Albert Valentin founded a ciné-club in 1926 in Brussels at the Palais des beaux-arts, directorship was taken over by Carl Vincent the following year. Elsewhere in Belgium, at Ostende, a »club du cinéma« was founded in 1928 which pioneered late night events weekly screening from 11 at night to half past twelve films by Louis Delluc, Lupu Pick, Man Ray, Robert Wiene, Alberto Cavalcanti, René Clair, Marcel L’Herbier. These clubs became part of a nationwide network that also spawned Liège, Antwerp, Ghent and Leuven – the Belgium network was modelled on French examples and closely connected to France. This national association, the Club du Cinéma, which
managed to keep up operation for some years well into the 1930s was biased towards the artistic-aesthetic side of the avant-garde\textsuperscript{123} while the socialists also took an active interest in cinema matters, especially in the course of the 1930s.\textsuperscript{124}

In Switzerland, alternative distribution and exhibition came somewhat later, at a time when other societies could already look back upon several years of activities. The \textit{Werkbund}-exhibition \textit{Film und Foto} travelled after its show in Stuttgart to Zürich where it was exhibited from the end of August until the end of September 1929, yet the film programme curated by Hans Richter was not screened for reasons unclear.\textsuperscript{125} One possibility would be the lack of available cinemas: until well into the 1930s alternative circles had trouble with booking cinemas for screenings as exhibitors in some countries (similar examples can be found in England, France, and Germany) exercised considerable pressure on colleagues not to rent their cinemas even at times when they were not used otherwise. Owners of commercial cinemas considered film societies to be competitors on a field that should be limited to established players. In Geneva, the \textit{Ciné-Club de Genève}, started operation in 1928. Its monthly meetings supplemented by the magazine \textit{Ciné} was oriented towards French avant-garde cinema, but it found its public forum in the English language magazine \textit{Close Up} which was published in Switzerland too. The Geneva club inaugurated operation on 14 March 1928 with Man Ray’s \textit{EMAK BAKIA} (FR 1927) and Jean Epstein’s \textit{LA GLACE À TROIS FACE} (FR 1927). On 18 April Alberto Cavalcanti was the guest of honour and on 2 May films by Germaine Dulac were screened. The club became a part of the French-language network that also spawned Belgium.\textsuperscript{126} The Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH – Polytechnic university) in Zürich had already set up a film office (Filmtelle) in 1922 which screened films and offered lectures and courses on the cinema, yet very much within a framework of educational and technical questions – initially aesthetic or social consideration played a minor role here. In 1932, the film office instigated a regular film programme which was successful, but proved too time consuming and work intensive; for that reason it was turned over in 1933 to the \textit{Schweizer Werkbund} (SWB) which had organised the Zürich-stay of the Stuttgart-exhibition in 1929 and furthermore had commissioned Hans Richter for a project on reformist modern architecture with \textit{DIE NEUE WOHNUNG} (CH 1930).\textsuperscript{127} They had already in 1930 brought over Hans Richter for a presentation and lecture to accompany the \textit{FiFo}-exhibition and then continued with regular programmes, sometimes with guests like László Moholy-Nagy, until the group ceased activity after 36 film programmes in 1935. This close connection between education (university), professional design (Werkbund) and an humanist engagement is typical for the reformist wing of the alternative cinema culture.

A workers’ film society, \textit{Foreningen for Filmskultur} (»Association for Film Culture«), was founded in Denmark in 1930\textsuperscript{128} and in Porto existed an \textit{Associação dos Amigos do Cinema} from the second half of the 1920s onwards.\textsuperscript{129}
The Portuguese association which was a membership organisation for film enthusiasts handed out an annual price, ran a library, was involved in publication and production, but it is unclear if it also projected regularly films. Thus, it might have been an exceptional film club insofar as it was not based on exhibition practice. The further development in Portugal in the 1930s was rather in the sector of amateur film societies; thus, oriented towards solving technical problems instead of developing screening practice and aesthetic capabilities of judgment. Film societies in its traditional sense were only founded in the 1940s in Portugal.

Similarly, Poland had two artists’ associations promoting artistic film in the 1930s: Stowarzyszenie Milosników filmu Artystycznego (START – Society of the Devotees of the Artistic Film) from 1930 to 1935 and after 1937 the Spółdzielnna Autorów Filmowych (Co-Operative of Film Authors). The former included directors Aleksander Ford and Wanda Jakubowska, but also later film historian Jerzy Toepplitz and rallied around the slogan »the struggle for films for the public good« while the latter incorporated Stefan and Franciszka Themerson who made some noteworthy avant-garde films. Yet, Poland did not have any real film societies until after World War Two. Czechoslovakia had a very active and cross-media avant-garde in the interwar period that gathered around Karel Teige as the key figure and had taken up »poetism« (a mixture of constructivism and lyricism) as its cause. A shortlived film society was founded in 1927 and around this time production was started. Svatopluk Innemann, Alexander Hackenschmied (who later in the United States became famous as Hammid), Otakar Vávra, Jan Kučera, František Burian, Jiří Lehovec and Karel and Irene Dodal formed the centre of an active avant-garde that produced everything from architectural studies to advertisements. These activists organised »weeks of avant-garde film« in the early 1930s and took up production on a more steady base. In the mid-1930s most people from this circle moved to Zlín, an industrial city designed and built by and for the shoe company Bata where they formed a film department that produced experimental advertisement films. In keeping with the spirit of the time the films promoted the shoes and the city (much like Philips and Eindhoven or later Volkswagen and Wolfsburg) which both stood for the relentless modernising drive that had also taken hold in Czechoslovakia.

If looking at the ciné-club movement purely in quantitative terms, if comparing size, number or frequency of activities alone, then the peak of the film society movement has to be located some time between 1930 and 1935. This clearly shows that it was not sound film that brought down the European avant-garde as is so often stated. The strategic convergence of several interest and lobby groups over the 1920s was mirrored by the functional differentiation on the other side of the divide, yet many new groups were founded after 1930 and many continued their activities.
3.4 Institutionalisation and functional differentiation in the 1930s

Es gibt in solchen [Avantgarde-]Bewegungen immer einen Augenblick, da die ursprüngliche Spannung des Geheimbundes im sachlichen, profanen Kampf um Macht und Herrschaft explodieren oder als öffentliche Manifestation zerfallen und sich transformieren muß. Walter Benjamin (1929)

Until the mid to late 1930s many film clubs had either vanished, transformed into political, governmental, educational or archival institutions or developed into amateur organisation largely devoid of a wider social and political agenda, let alone revolutionary fervour. If people and institutions had been active in different sectors of the cinema before – film societies like the Filmliga had effectively ventured into distribution and production – the 1930s saw a growing sense of divergence and falling apart which might be described in a more productive fashion as a functional differentiation of a sector of the cinema that had blossomed in the decade before. Many film societies limited themselves to monthly or bi-monthly screening forums without the dynamic drive for change that had propelled these movements into the forefront of aesthetic development in the late 1920s. Art house cinemas evolved out of this functional differentiation on the side of exhibition, archives were the result of the preservatory impulse, publishing and teaching stemmed from the reform oriented side of the activities, and curating activities and meetings galvanised into film festivals which were also born in the 1930s. One of the three Parisian art cinemas of those years, the Vieux Colombier, closed down in 1934 when Tédesco ventured completely into production. Likewise, the Film Society of London went into decline and lost much of its critical momentum in the course of the 1930s before ceasing activity with the outbreak of World War Two.

After a couple of years with seemingly unrestricted growth the avant-garde had not only reached a critical mass in 1929/30, it also showed first symptoms of fatigue. Even in circles not unsympathetic to the avant-garde in general such as the German trade paper Film-Kurier harsh criticism of the snobbish attitude and lack of popular support was voiced:


Even though this might not be a representative opinion similar voices pointing out a formulaic and repetitive film format can also be found in the avant-garde organ Close Up. An article by Robert Herring in May 1929 pokes fun at some of the typical stylistic features of the avant-garde that are rapidly becoming a cliché.
Herring advises the aspiring amateur to travel to Paris, shoot on the Metro and under the Eiffel tower, »show you know BERLIN« and add a measure of water and traffic in order to make a successful avant-garde film.\textsuperscript{138} A case in point are the Workers’ Film Societies in England which mushroomed in 1929, then had a fairly steady development for two or three years, before either faltering for a variety of reasons or transforming into more conservative clubs for the appreciation of the cinema.\textsuperscript{139} Moreover, the success of the various societies had also seduced commercial cinemas to screening an alternative programme occasionally, regularly or exclusively. In England, a number of modernist high-brow and avant-garde magazines such as Film Art or World Film News testify to the stability of an audience for alternative films. In one of those papers, Cinema Quarterly, the situation is assessed in 1932:

> The comparative success of such films as LE MILLION, MÄDCHEN IN UNIFORM, and KAMERADSCHAFT, despite their foreign dialogue and lack of organised publicity, has proven beyond doubt that there is an intelligent cinema audience sufficiently large to support films of the highest artistic standard...\textsuperscript{140}

These films which would have been the standard fare of film societies in the 1920s now ended up on commercial screens. Obviously, this was taking business from the audience organisations whose original impetus was to bring films to the cinema that did not stand a chance otherwise. The success of the film societies resulted in a larger audience which in turn killed them as commercial cinemas were at least partly taking over their segment. Yet again, the British magazine also lists many film societies being active all across cities in Great Britain, often connected to educational institutions (Oxford University, Eton College), but also sub-standard film societies which were more oriented towards practical work than towards a screening practice. Thus, commercial art films with some audience potential ventured to normal cinemas while some of the bottom-up film societies turned to amateur work instead.\textsuperscript{141} The first bigger meetings of amateurs took place in the late 1920s such as the »National Convention of Amateur Cinematograph Societies« in October 1929 in London.\textsuperscript{142}

A crucial question concerns the availability of films at a time when film clubs interested in »different« kinds of film existed in many cultural centres in Europe. Production was in transformation in these years as old recipes had to be revised. One reason was surely the introduction of sound which necessitated an enormous investment to be able to start production. There were attempts at keeping one silent film theatre open in Paris, a project undertaken by critics and filmmakers which ultimately failed. More importantly, energy shifted towards the documentary impulse and – as could be seen in Grierson’s different configurations – these institutions tended to create their own screening contexts. Thus, many people had learned the lesson of the film society as is demonstrated by these moves outside the
informal and unstable contexts of the avant-garde and a coagulation of alternative distribution networks and screening circles into more formal organisations.

For programming purposes, the main problems of the film clubs after 1930 proved to be how to deal with sound films. The introduction of sound had intensified the capitalisation of the film industry. As an effect smaller companies ceased to exist or merged to form larger corporations, for which France is a particularly good example. Film production became more costly and consequently films had to recoup more money on their release. Film societies and alternative screening spaces could often not compete anymore with commercial exhibitors. Those films that had before guaranteed the survival of the audience organisation now went to commercial art cinemas that became increasingly professionalised. Film societies needed one or two »hits« per season to generate publicity and new members, now they turned into a second- or even third-run-house because the most interesting films were taken away by others. An attempt to work against this growing commercialisation of the alternative sector was the founding of an international office for the distribution of films by the Dutch Filmliga.

The introduction of sound had similar repercussions in production. Filmmakers associated with the avant-garde made sound films but they were often commercial and produced by large companies: René Clair made films for the multinational syndicate Tobis, Fritz Lang and G.W. Pabst worked for Seymour Nebenzal's Nero-Film, while another champion of the 1920s, Abel Gance, fell into obscurity. These larger companies had a clear distribution priority to large metropolitan cinemas and nationwide cinema chains, film societies would be at the bottom of receiving a specific film. Other former protagonists of the avant-garde turned increasingly towards industrial films such as Walter Ruttmann, Hans Richter, or Joris Ivens who made films for Hapag, Philips, Creosoot, or the German steel industry. Not too differently, these producers also had their agendas and only gave films to ciné-clubs once they had fulfilled their purpose. As a result the programmes often resorted to silent film, whereas normal cinemas had already changed to sound film. Production costs rose with the new equipment, so producers were less likely to take risks at financing experimental films. Moreover wiring cinemas for sound required the investment of considerable sums of money. Again, sound film was not the cause per se, but rather the catalyst that helped to introduce new manners of management and organisation, that kindled state interest in film. It was these developments in turn that transformed the avant-garde and its exhibition wing. Yet, the demand of film societies for sound film technology was soon realised. An advertisement in the British magazine Cinema Quaterly aimed at film clubs and educational institutions reads:

Film Societies, Schools, Clubs and Study Groups!
Western Electric offer you a trouble free hiring service providing – for a moderate inclusive fee – portable sound equipment – suitable for audiences of up to 600 people – services of an operator and, if required, a programme of films,
Convergence and Differentiation

entertainment, travel, scientific, educational, etc. The equipment can be erected in any hall at short notice…\(^{145}\)

One problem for the film societies appears, it could be said, that they were discovered as a niche market. As one could hire a sound projector with projectionist and a film programme the alternative networks that were in the process of getting together were short-circuited. Commercial suppliers took away that business from the screening clubs that guaranteed success and visibility leaving the initiatives with the harder-to-market stuff. The same could also be said of the commercial art houses that were appearing everywhere over Europe from the second half of the 1920s onwards. There was a high fluctuation in cinemas which occasionally or regularly screened a different kind of programme, but in larger cities commentators were pretty sure that one or more repertory theatre could be supported on a regular and commercial basis by the audience.\(^{146}\)

Another factor that should also not be forgotten: the availability of films, the chance to watch older films had to be given in order for a film club culture to evolve. Without the existence and support of a number of institutions such efforts were very difficult to keep up – Soviet trade agencies, backlists of distributors, directors travelling with their personal print of a film to introduce it (to which a certain mobility and wealth is necessary) were the pre-condition for the success of alternative cinema networks. As some active members of these movements realised this problem they started to build their own back catalogue or they simply followed their collector’s impulse which evolved into the archival movement.

The issue of the Soviet trade agencies is a case in point: Ivor Montagu has reported thoroughly on the troubles that the *Progressive Film Institute* had in dealing with the Soviet delegations\(^{147}\): First of all, the main purpose of the trade agencies was to sell Soviet films commercially abroad in order to obtain foreign currency much needed for the young Soviet Union; lending films to non-profit organisations such as the film-clubs was not high on their agenda, especially since these institution must have rather seemed like bourgeois clubs for art appreciation than revolutionary engines. Often, delegates attempted for many years in vain to place a Soviet film on the commercial market. Again, if film clubs would finally convince a trade agency to hand over such a film it was often years old. This created the problem that an avant-garde organisation was presenting a work some years old. A further complication was that film societies and similar organisations often operated on the basis of trust, as they needed to convince the Soviet delegates of their methods. Because the delegates were exchanged every couple of years like diplomats, there was no stable ground for a co-operation between the left-wing film clubs and the Soviet trade agencies. As soon as a common ground and a personal relationship was established between a film society and a trade agency, the Soviet delegate would be replaced by another envoy from Moscow.
3.4.1 Film and national life

Genau wie man sich eines Tages zusammenfinden wird, um einen gemeinsamen Export der deutschen Filmfabrikate ins Ausland in die Hand zu nehmen, genau so werden sich die maßgebenden Firmen vereinen, um eine Stelle zu finanzieren, die zum Nutzen der gesamten Fabrikation unter Aufsicht der Industrie und für die Industrie Filmexperimente macht.

Ernst Jäger (1927) 148

Already in the second half of the 1920s there were calls for a national effort of coordinating experimental work. As in Ernst Jäger's statement quoted above this combination conventionally aimed at integrating the avant-garde into the wider context of film culture. To call for the state in supporting film appeared natural, given the fact that the state heavily regulated the cinema through censorship, import quotas, taxes, building and fire regulations and other laws. The leading spokesmen of the film industry therefore believed that the state also had an obligation to help the cinema. Various texts asked for state-supported institutions such as a film laboratory, a film school, a state cinema, and academic research. 149 Whereas radical theorists as Walter Benjamin would have disagreed and argued instead for a radicalisation of the avant-garde in order to engender transformations, many observers wanted to integrate the fledging movement into mainstream film culture. The effect should have been twofold: on the one hand the experimental impulses could have been harnessed and this new construction could be used for servicing ideas such as the national which was on the rise everywhere in Europe after 1929.

As the energy of the film societies functionally differentiated while also losing revolutionary momentum, other groups and sectors followed the film societies and took up film because the importance of cinema was hardly debatable anymore. New groups now »discovered« film as a medium for building, sustaining, influencing, and manipulating a/the public. Political parties and government bodies became major motion picture producers as they realised the value of film. This shift can be seen across different countries in different configurations. John Grierson brought the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) and the General Post Office (GPO) Film Units in England into existence, two governmental agencies active across a vast field of production, distribution, exhibition and marketing. The situation in Nazi Germany was in some respect comparable to that in the Soviet Union where the state increasingly became involved in production. In Italy, the Istituto Luce and the production company Cines, and the involvement of Benito Mussolini's son Vittorio, gathered much energy and momentum around different non-fictional film formats. State efforts in cinema affairs in democratic systems include the French front populaire which was quite active in filmmaking and Roosevelt's New Deal as part of the larger programmes to employ artists and creative personnel. The last occasion to generate a vigorous response from
filmmakers was the Spanish civil war which attracted artists and activists from many countries to defend the Republic. Of course, many of these films were openly political and therefore also intensified political divergent meanings within the film societies which were before often glossed over by a vague allusion to film art or independence, to *absoluter Film* or *cinéma pur*. These movements were happening thanks to larger tectonic shifts in the political landscape: a growing polarisation moved the majority either towards the political left or to the right, a growing social division and political tension was brought about by the crisis of the economic system following the stock exchange crash of 1929, and a general search for alternative social and ideological models to deal with the critical situation looked for ever more radical solutions.

The Empire Film Board and General Post Office Film Unit are nowadays mainly remembered for their innovative films. This is typical of historiography concentrating almost exclusively on the films while ignoring more ephemeral activities such as distribution, programming, organisations of lectures and teaching. In fact, the two Griersonian institutions were mainly aimed – if judged by their statutes and other written documents – at bringing films to people, at changing the way the audience would typically watch a film. Central to their task and activities was the organisation of film presentations and the building and maintenance of a distribution network, the production of films was something of a supplement. The reason for this is easy to see as different kinds of films were needed for such an alternative screening circuit aimed at social reform and adult education. Seen from this perspective, film production in the context of Grierson’s governmental film institutions could be argued to have learned from the history of film clubs: One of the main reasons for the loss of energy and dynamism can be put down to a lack of adequate films during the introduction of sound. Grierson had therefore learned his lesson and the celebrated films could be argued to have been made in order to overcome the shortage of screenable films. As Ian Aitken writes: »[T]he documentary film movement did not only consist of a collection of films. It was also established to service a campaign for political and cultural reform, and it utilized film, written material, speeches, lectures, and other means of persuasion to that end.«¹⁵⁰ Grierson’s film units were first and foremost headquarters of a publicity campaign which tried to create a *Medienverbund* in which the films were an important element, but not an end in itself. Yet, the documentary film movement was not the only initiative in Britain continuing the work begun by the *Film Society*.

The *British Film Institute (BFI)* was founded with semi-official status in October 1932 (in autumn 1933 officially) based on a government report *The Film in National Life*.¹⁵¹ Its aim was to further cooperation between the film industry (»those who make, distribute, exhibit films«) and »all who are inter-ested in the artistic, educational and cultural possibilities of films«. In the beginning the *BFI* was mainly occupied with educational film and financed with the help of a special tax from the cinemas.¹⁵² The film archive *National Film Library* was set up by the
BFI in 1935. Some of the free floating energy of the late 1920s was channeled into this project, some of it survived in the film magazines of the 1930s (Cinema Quarterly and Sight and Sound, both published from 1932 onwards; Film Art started to come out in 1933). The rest of the energy was absorbed by what came to be known as the Documentary Film Movement of John Grierson. Ivor Montagu, key figure of the Film Society has argued similarly on the final days of that institution: »The banner has passed to the BFI, the NFA, the BFFS, Film Festivals that milk not mainly USA and Europe but the wider world, the NFT and the commercial theatres for specialised audiences.«¹⁵³ This shift to acronyms is only the most visible sign of a growing institutionalisation taming the transformative energy of the film avant-garde.

A similar configuration in which the state used the cinema for its own purposes can be found in the debate and founding around the Swedish Film Association in 1933. In fact, the state had heard the call of the avant-garde that Ruttman and others had uttered, but it answered in ways unexpected to the avant-garde. In a way, the reaction of the state was similar to that of the industry: they only devoured those parts of the avant-garde that it considered useful and left the rest to decay. Certainly, by being digested the avant-garde had some influence, but never in the direct way that they themselves were hoping for. The Swedish professional society was focusing on

a didactical documentary discourse. In short, the ideas behind the Film Association were to »artistically, culturally and technically promote cinema in Sweden.« As an academic undertaking it sought to promulgate a new national film culture, not only in terms of refined production guidelines, but also as to cultivate public taste and, via publications, inform on cinematic matters. [...] With the task to increase the cultural prestige of cinema, it addressed all kinds of filmic issues: from film aesthetics and manuscript contests to state funding of production and film theoretical speculations.¹⁵⁴

This event was followed by a public debate about role and function of the cinema in the life of the nation that ran through most of the 1930s. One should keep in mind that these state activities took place regardless of the political organisation: from the communist Soviet Union through socialdemocratic Sweden and reformist United States and England up to fascist Germany and Italy. Most of the topics, aims, discourses and interests were in the (imaginary) realm of the film societies only some years earlier; the nation state only with the coming of sound really took over from other organisational forms. In this respect the coming of sound would not only mark the final stage of the shift of control from the exhibitor to the producer, but it also marked the completion of the phase in which the nation state would gradually occupy and use film as a means of propaganda and self-promotion. Thus, from the battlefield of World War One and the founding of the
Ufa one could see a line developing to the emerging state institutions for archiving, researching and promoting film as can be seen in Sweden or in England.

In 1928 the most important German trade paper *Film-Kurier* reserved a whole page for addressing the state to fund a number of initiatives that most have been important to (liberal) forces within the film industry. Besides the tradition-al call for tax breaks the rest appears rather unusual and could have been right out of an avant-garde magazine. The *Film-Kurier* asks the state to support studios for experimental film and for film music, schools for film and for film music, a devotion of universities to the cinema, a film museum and archive and a price for film music.\(^{155}\) This consequent devotion to experimenting on the one hand while also safeguarding future (schools) and past (archive, museum) are typical for the avant-garde, yet that these calls come from a forum of the industry illustrates how some of these ideas were becoming common currency around 1930. In fact, vocational training, a devotion to experimental work, supporting film in the service of the national and the serious engagement with historicity went hand in hand at the time when sound cinema was introduced.

These transformations were not lost on avant-garde activists. Iris Barry, one of the hidden protagonist in the transfiguration of the avant-garde movement into filmmaking in the service of the nation-state and the archive-historicist impulse, was travelling across Europe in 1935. She was on a trip in order to acquire films for the MOMA archive when she reported about Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens* (DE 1934/35):

Elsewhere, an entirely new and significant tendency is apparent in an attempt to record out-standing national events by means of film. [...] The use of film for such purposes is new. [...] Lately, the British Government has been the producer of a number of lively *shorts* dealing specifically with its own activities in the domestic realm of communication – radio, post-office, weather bureau, and the like. Technically, it is these which have the most likeness to the new kind of German films of which I speak, though the latter take a much larger canvas. The mass meeting of the Nazi Party at Nürnberg in the autumn of 1934 was not merely filmed, the whole meeting was organized in such a way that a direct and living record of the celebration could be made. Camera emplacements had been carefully worked out and installed, a battery of cameras was trained on the gathering so as to provide close shots, long shots, travelling shots – and so that the speeches and other sounds might be properly recorded. THE TRIUMPH OF THE WILL, as this full-length picture made for domestic consumption only is called, proved one of the most brilliantly assembled and edited films imaginable: it enables a remote member of the general public to participate as at first hand in the meeting.\(^{156}\)

Barry not only makes the connection between the Griersonian school and filmmaking in Nazi Germany in terms of support mechanisms, but also stylistically. The participatory dimension of the state-sponsored cinema of the 1930s could also be an avant-garde legacy as the destruction of barriers between film and
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spectator, between producer and consumer had been high on the agenda of the alternative movements of the previous decade. That this participation of the spectator in the events on the screen would take such a turn as in the case of Riefenstahl was certainly not foreseeable by the avant-garde activists.

3.4.2 Archiving and Historicity

The idea of film preservation and creating an archive of films is nearly as old as film itself. The first calls for a film archive, »Une nouvelle source de l’histoire« and »La photographie animée, ce qu’elle est, ce qu’elle doit être«, were written and published by the Polish photographer Boleslaw Matuszewski and sent to French institutions in 1898. Yet, he came too early and at the time the calls went unheard.158 Closer to my purpose here, Louis Delluc as one of the »founding fathers« of the film avant-garde had already in the early 1920s called for a »library or repertory of significant films [...]«, not only to preserve but to promulgate the idea of cinema art and to educate cinema audiences in order to support further innovations and the cinema’s eventual achievements.159 The construction of a canon of important works, the consciousness for film history, the attempt to guarantee access to this history and the integration of these concerns into a transformed cinema culture – all these issues were important elements of avant-garde film culture. The programming of older films has been a staple of film societies as their initial impetus partly resulted from the desire to re-watch specific films. The forms that it took – homages, reveries or negative re-evaluations – differed widely. Sometimes it was done solemnly with the desire to watch films that one has missed, calling for a second- and third-run market: »One often wants to see films one has missed. It is never possible. After a year or two they are as dead as a doornail. Some enterprising person might pull strings so that the best survived, and more than that, are shown.«160 Yet, sometimes very consciously a media event was created as in the effort by Robert Aron (initially the driving force behind the La Sarraz meeting) and Jean Georges Auriol to bring Georges Méliès back into public consciousness161: a special issue of their magazine La revue du cinéma in October 1929 with original texts, scenarios, reprints and a critical essay by Paul Gilson was supplemented by a screening of eight Méliès-films at the Salle
Pleyel, co-organised by Studio 28, and the papers L'amí du peuple and Figaro.\textsuperscript{162} Despite the different forms that these early film historical events took one unifying factor of the avant-garde was nevertheless a consciousness for the history of the cinema which resulted in film collections and written film histories. The first ones to venture in these areas were veterans from the ciné-clubs in the 1930s, heavily influenced by concerns advanced in avant-garde circles in the 1920s.

For archiving the coming of sound proved to be a crucial moment. One fundamental change brought about by this media change was the sudden devaluation of silent films. Within the course of half a year the film stock, the »library« or »archive« as proponents of cultural conservation would have it or the »backlist« as the US studios call their older products, was considered worthless. Besides leading to the massive destruction of film material – in economic terms it appeared pointless to waste money on storing objects that did not seem to have any exchange value anymore – it also opened the way for collectors to get hold of many old films that were unattainable before. When the swift shift to sound film was obvious in Europe in 1930 all producers and distributors had to follow, quickly selling of their remaining silent programmers to far-away regions such as South America or China which were in respect to the transition to sound two or three years behind the United States in the first instance, yet also considerable time behind England, France and Germany.\textsuperscript{163} This devaluation of silent film also triggered the archival movement begun by several young enthusiasts who had been members of different ciné-clubs and grown up within the circles of alternative film culture. The impulse of restructuring cinema culture gave way to an attention towards those »orphans« that were now homeless – as the state did not yet answer to Ruttmann’s call quoted above the archival movement began as a private enterprise by a select few.

In the course of the 1930s one streak of the film society movement became the first generation of archivists: Iris Barry had been an important figure in the London Film Society until leaving for New York in 1930 after her divorce from Alan Porter and having been sacked from the Daily Mail.\textsuperscript{164} Some months earlier, in summer 1929, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., had been asked to draw up a plan for the new institution by the trustees of the institution. His plan included departments of commercial and industrial art, theatre design, film, photography, besides painting and sculpture. Yet, in light of the depression MOMA started out with painting and sculpture alone, the most established arts and thus easier to win private patrons (on which MOMA had to rely as a privately financed institution). Iris Barry worked as a freelance writer until 1932 when she became »film librarian« at the MOMA. In a pamphlet written in 1932 and entitled The Public as Artist Barr called again for the inclusion of film in the museum. That year Barry started her job at MOMA, linking up with Hollywood through the backing of John Hay Whitney as the first important step for acquiring the necessary material for the archive. Tellingly, Barry did not start by approaching
the avant-garde, even though that was her background. She recognised the limitations inherited from the Film Societies through their history, organisation and stance. Also, she knew that she only had a chance in the long run if she could muster the support of the big industry in Hollywood. The Film Library was founded in 1935 (which later turned into the department of film, still its name today) and the cinema was run from 1939 onwards.

We should not forget that it was also Iris Barry who preserved some of the avant-garde spirit and built bridges that helped exiles as different as Luis Buñuel and Siegfried Kracauer during the war. Her support possibly saved Buñuel from becoming an obscure and forgotten extra on the margins of the 1920s surrealist movement who vanished into thin air after having collaborated with Salvador Dalí on two films. The same could be said about Kracauer: Without his seminal study *From Caligari to Hitler* which he could not have written without the support of Barry he might have ended up a film critic nowadays only remembered by experts (such as Hans Feld or Willy Haas). And there is a third important person that she helped and whose life she possibly gave a new direction: In 1936 Barry went to Europe and visited Eisenstein in Moscow who was working on _BEZIN LUG_ (SU 1936) at the time. Barry convinced Eisenstein’s assistant Jay Leyda (who had been to Moscow for three years) to come with her to MOMA as her new assistant. What goes around comes around: Buñuel, Kracauer, Leyda – three key figures for film historiography, the avant-garde and film theory were all helped at crucial moments by Iris Barry who herself had gotten her film socialisation at the London Film Society. The circles of the avant-garde screening clubs and filmmaking had a lasting influence that outlived their actual period of operation because the energy generated flowed in different projects at different places.

In Paris, Henri Langlois, slightly younger than the pioneer generation (born in Smyrna, today Izmir, in 1912) and in François Truffaut’s words »perhaps the most gifted of film lovers<sup>165</sup>«, was a pivotal figure for the institutionalisations of film archives from the 1930s to the 1960s.<sup>166</sup> After Langlois met Georges Franjú in 1934 they started their own ciné-club, forerunner of the *Cercle du Cinéma*. In Langlois’ and Franjú’s ciné-club *Cercle du Cinéma* discussions were not allowed after screenings – an attempt to create a different kind of ciné-club. They combined the idea of a film club exhibiting films with the idea of an archive storing films to create the *Cinémathèque*.<sup>167</sup> Actually, the money for the first prints that they bought came from Paul-August Harlé, publisher of the trade weekly *La Cinématographie Française*, but also involved financially in printing businesses and poster design. Moreover, Harlé convinced Alexandre Kamenka, president of Albatros Films, to deposit his films with Langlois and Franjú, among them many »commercial« art film classics of the 1920s such as _LE BRASIER ARDENT_ (FR 1923, Ivan Mosjoukine / Alexandre Volkoff), _FEU MATHIAS PASCAL_ (FR 1924, Marcel L’Herbier), _CARMEN_ (FR 1926, Jacques Feyder), _UN CHAPEAU DE PAILLE D’ITALIE_ (FR 1927, René Clair) and _LES NOUVEAUX MESSIEURS_ (FR 1928, Jacques Feyder).<sup>168</sup> Harlé
made a lot of connection in the industry until he fell from grace with Langlois, himself a legendary »difficult« character. The introduction of sound proved to be the key moment for Langlois, already an avid film lover by then, triggering him on his lifetime project of film archiving and presenting:

The triumph of the sound film only a year after A GIRL IN EVERY PORT [i.e. 1928/1929] was to prove the determining event in Langlois's career. Not because he rejected sound [...] but because he soon realized that it was to endanger the survival of decades of silent masterpieces. [...] The revolution of the talkies was imposed, as Langlois said, by box-office receipts, against the conservative filmmakers and critics. For the first time in the history of cinema, they began to cherish its past and tried to safeguard it.169

Conservative in regards to technical developments were critics and filmmakers, not necessarily the industry which followed the money. The industry is first and foremost rather disinterested in the aesthetic, social, or political value of changes regarding production and exhibition of films. An industry organised according to capitalist principles was following the audience; and if the audience wanted new stuff the industry would try to provide it.

Industry connections were vital for a film archive to get the ball rolling and while the ciné-clubs provided the basis for the selection criteria, the industry link were crucial, for Barry as well as for Langlois. While the avant-garde classics were easily within the reach through personal acquaintance, the productions of the bigger companies were much more difficult to obtain. In fact, the pioneer generation of the archives realised from the very start that it either needed government organisation and sponsoring (as in England, Sweden or Germany) or the direct support of the industry because otherwise these films would have just been too expensive and impossible to obtain. As one of the key problems of the film societies had been the availability of films – often blocked by commercial distributors or producers – the archivists had surely learned their lessons and started building an archive by installing industry liaisons. Later, Germaine Dulac took that task of industry liaison over from 1936–38 because she was influential in the French industry in her position as the director of the newsreel and documentary department at Gaumont.170

A retrospective text by Henri Langlois, written 1956 on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the cinema, makes the connection of the archiving movement to the avant-garde and the coming of sound explicit and he furthermore puts forward ideas very similar to the ones developed in this work:

However, the »silent art« had created too much enthusiasm, had been the object of too exclusive a cult, had created too many vocations to be forgotten so quickly by a generation of critics. And so were born – almost at the same time, but without any concerted action – the first three cinémathèques devoted to conserving and projecting cinematographic works of art: New York, London, and Paris. This was
not by chance. Each of these three cinémathèques was the last creation of that great movement of opinion which, from 1916 to 1930, had arisen in favor of the cinema. The last of the film clubs was liquidated, film criticism was paralyzed, everything had fallen to pieces but, before it disappeared, this movement was able to create the cinémathèques.

Contrary to Langlois' claim I would argue that it was not the movement that was able to create with its last remaining breath the cinémathèques, but that energy and interest wandered elsewhere and seemingly an archive was a project that governments or art museums would support, so it seemed a feasible option in order to make a living and carry the movement along. The main problem of the film societies, yet also their advantage, was that their activities were ephemeral as a screening leaves hardly any material traces. Thus, magazines and screening notes, archival collections and publishing houses were started in order to fill the gap and create something more lasting. Langlois and his Cinémathèque also helped other institutions in their beginnings: Both the Cineteca Italiana in Milano, founded by Mario Ferrari, and the Cinémathèque Royale in Brussels, founded by André Thirifays got their ideas and first films from Langlois in Paris in 1937 and 1938 respectively – the normal way to start a film society was to go to Paris, get in contact with the right people, acquire some films, and then return home and start your film club. This development carried on after World War Two when Freddy Buache, founder of the Cinémathèque Suisse and Fred Junck who installed a film archive in Luxemburg both acquired their film education to no small measure at the Cinémathèque Française.

Whereas the Cinémathèque Française was a private initiative, collecting and archiving film and matters related to the cinema fell within the domain of the newly founded British Film Institute in Britain. The state took a lively interest in matters of film in England: the various educational activities in the context of the London Film Society led to the foundation of the BFI and then subsequently to the National Film Archive. Ivor Montagu, one of the key figure of the London Film Society, himself was later a member of the Film Archive Selection Committee of the BFI. Despite many differences, veterans from the film club movement played an important part here as well. Olwen Vaughan was the daughter of Reverend Hemming Vaughan, founder of the Merseyside Film Society. She grew up within the circles and activities of the ciné-club movement. Olwen Vaughan reigned the BFI, started the film archive, and hired Ernest Lindgren as its first curator who became the nemesis of Langlois in the postwar period. Lindgren became the epitome of the archivists who would not screen in order to preserve while for Langlois archiving meant screening. Even though this dichotomy between Lindgren and Langlois has been exaggerated an archive always has to deal with the dialectics of archiving and presenting. An archive print should not be screened too often as every screening act is a potential danger to the print and a film print only has a limited screening life. Even though Langlois of the Cinémathèque Française
was famous as a champion of screening, the tension between archiving and screening remains insolvable. Thus, a stronger urge to preserving and archiving not only lessened the time and energy available for screening and presenting, it also created the desire not to screen. Thus, a discussion of the Langlois and Lindgren positions leads us back to the film societies as screening is potentially the destroyer and the enemy of a film while the archival and preservatory impulse runs counter to the desire to screen. As the preservatory impulse grew stronger, the tendency to screen consequently diminished.

In Germany, like in England or Sweden, it was the nation state that brought a film archive into existence. On the first anniversary of the Nazi’s ascension to power the Reichsfilmkammer (chamber of film) donated a number of films as a basis for a future film archive. The foundation of this institution was further prepared under the auspices of Dr. Seeger (head censor) by ministerial bureaucrat Dr. Böttger within Goebbels’ ministry of enlightenment and propaganda. Four days before the official founding at which Hitler is personally present Böttger was replaced by Frank Hensel, an activist of Nazi-film work from before 1933. Hensel had produced such propaganda films as EIN FEIERTAG IN HESSEN-NASSAU / HITLERS BRAUNE SOLDATEN KOMMEN (DE 1931) or HITLERS KAMPF UM DEUTSCHLAND (DE 1932). Thus, even in fascist Germany the archival impulse is connected to non-mainstream or »alternative film culture« of the 1920s and early 1930s. For the nationalsocialists, the archive was something of a perfect match between the preservatory impulse and the national as it facilitated a rewriting of history through the command of audiovisual documents.

As I am dealing extensively with men, a brief remark on the role of women should be inserted here: Germaine Dulac must be counted as one of the pivotal figures of the film avant-garde, yet less orientated towards propagating her own personality and work, but rather as a go-between, organiser, and enabler. Women were also crucial presences in the first years of the archive movement. Dulac had to occupy one of the two positions that the informal networks of the avant-garde left to women: she was a »maternal« presence in the background, a caretaker eclipsed by the men’s public appearance. Dulac in this position was comparable to Iris Barry in New York or Olwen Vaughan in London – in some ways, Mary Meerson inherited Dulac’s role in Paris as the stable supplement to Henri Langlois’ flamboyance and extravaganza, along with Lotte Eisner and Marie Epstein. In London at the BFI Vaughan stood back behind Ernest Lindgren, while Barry moved in the shadow of MOMA’s founding director Alfred Barr. The other possible position for them to occupy was that of objects that were traded between the men as Gala moved from Paul Eluard to Salvador Dali, Pera Attaschewa formed a couple with Hans Richter and Sergei Eisenstein, Erna Niemeyer who had studied at the Bauhaus Weimar in the early 1920s worked with Viking Eggeling and was subsequently married to Hans Richter and surrealist writer Philippe Soupault. Her own photographic work (as Ré Soupault) has only recently been
rediscovered. In between the motherly and older helpers and the muses to be traded as objects there was little space for women’s roles in the avant-garde circles between such flamboyant self-promoters as Hans Richter, László Moholy-Nagy, Walter Ruttmann, Joris Ivens or Sergei Eisenstein.

Once the archives had been established, what was needed was a measure of international exchange. The idea for an international network of alternative cinema institutions is certainly as old as the first film societies; these groups have been international from the very beginning, albeit in a chaotic, personal and unsystematic way. Films, texts, discourses and ideas were traded and exchanged internationally from the mid-1920s onwards. At La Sarraz in 1929 an international league for independent film was founded and some years later an international federation active in the business of conserving and collecting old films was proposed by Germaine Dulac who urged Georges Franju and Henri Langlois to institutionalise their international contacts with the archives in London and New York, run by Olwen Vaughan and Iris Barry respectively. While travelling in Europe in the mid-1930s Iris Barry also stopped in Berlin where she reported favourably on the Reichsfilmarchiv and in Paris where she met with Henri Langlois, a meeting that led to the founding of the international network of film archives. A little bit of anecdotal history might shed some light on the transformed political agenda of the archival world. When meeting in Paris in October 1938 to found the Federation Internationale des Archives du Film (FIAF), Frank Hensel of the Reichsfilmarchiv in Berlin unexpectedly showed up and was admitted as the fourth founding member of FIAF. Hensel was even elected president in 1939 while Franju served as the administrative secretary paid by the French government – and Paris remained for a long time the official home of FIAF, in keeping with Paris’ role as the capital of cinephilia. Franju’s office was in the Palais Royal at the Office of Intellectual Cooperation, equivalent to UNESCO within the setup of the League of Nations.

Yet, the idea of history was not limited to the preservatory impulse and the archival movement, but the films themselves also increasingly dealt with the historicity of the film material and of the scenes and events represented in the film. Already in 1928 Ufa produced a film that summarised and historicised the career of popular actress Henny Porten, HENNY PORTEN – LEBEN UND LAUFBAHN EINER FILMKÜNSTLERIN (DE 1928, Oskar Kalbus), a year later the Porten-film is followed up with a compilation of love scenes from cinema history, RUND UM DIE LIEBE (DE 1929, Oskar Kalbus). Both films were screened and discussed in avant-garde circles as the concept of compilation or Querschnitt related to aesthetic ideas such as collage or remontage. Another example of this trend is the trajectory of Germaine Dulac. Ever since the late 1910s, Dulac had always oscillated between openly experimental and more mainstream work. Her work in the 1930s opened the avant-garde further up to the industrial film, but also to questions of film and history as her last major project was a compilation film on LE CINÉMA AU SERVICE
DE L’HISTOIRE (FR 1935). Dulac had been in charge of the newsreel FRANCE-
ACTUALITÉS since 1932 and a critic praised her work: «C’est grâce à elle que les
programmes de France-Actualités ont cette objectivité, cette honnêteté, ces choix
heureux que nous avons déjà signalés». In LE CINÉMA AU SERVICE DE
L’HISTOIRE Dulac provides a history of the near-past (since World War One) from
archive material and gives a sketch of the state of the world. This found-footage
history film has its equivalent in the Soviet compilation film innovated by Esfir
Shub who has made a trilogy from archive material sketching Russian and Soviet
history from the end of the 19th Century to the beginning of the Five-Year-Plan.

3.5 Conclusion

Le film d’avant-garde ne s’adresse pas au simple plaisir de la foule.
Il est à la fois, plus égoïste et plus altruiste. Egoïste, puisque manifestation
personnelle d’une pensée pure ; altruiste, puisque dégagé de tout souci
autre que le progrès. Le film d’avant-garde d’inspiration sincère a cette
qualité primordiale de contenir en germe sous une apparence parfois
inaccessible, les découvertes susceptibles d’acheminer les films vers la
forme cinématographique des temps futurs. L’avant-garde naît, à la fois,
de la critique du présent et de la prescience de l’avenir.

Germaine Dulac (1932)

In this chapter I have looked at the film society movement in detail. The ciné-clubs
and audience organisations were part and parcel of the historical film avant-garde of
the interwar period. The ciné-clubs cannot be separated from the avant-garde and
vice versa – these were closely connected initiatives all aiming in a similar
direction. Yet, we should not make the mistake to put these attempts in binary
opposition to the industry even though at that time this opposition was sometimes
mobilised for a distinctive rhetorical function, i.e. to create a common enemy.
Instead we have to look closely at the dialectic interplay between avant-garde and
industry. And despite the discontinuation of many ciné-clubs activities in the
course of the 1930s, they have created something more durable than their
ephemeral events. Ralph Bond, pioneer of the British Workers’ Film Society, has
pointed out that not only a new public was at stake, but a new way of watching
film: »Maar we hadden niet alleen een nieuw publiek bereikt, maar ook een nieuwe
wijze van denken teweeggebracht, met talloze onderschen enthousiastelingen. Ik
denk, dat onze beweging niet alleen iets begon, maar ook iets van blijvende waarde
créérde.« Yet, this lasting value was not material and was to be found mainly in
the attitudes of the people involved in these initiatives; as they slowly infiltrated
many sectors of the film industry and film culture the ideas of the 1920s began to
take hold in the culture at large. In the build-up to this crucial moment the avant-
garde was capable of gathering energy and providing a cause to rally around. It is
the strategic convergence that characterises the rise of the film societies – strategic
in the sense that the different groups all saw cinema to varying degrees as a functional medium that could be fitted into their own schemes. At the time few people realised that the different groups involved in avant-garde activities would move into different directions in the course of the 1930s.

It was not so much the changed situation after 1929 — sound film and economic crisis — that brought about the decline of the film societies, but it was this changed situation that made the internal contradictions that stood behind the strategic convergence visible. Essentially, complete independence that was proclaimed as a goal was never obtainable and only very few of the canonised classics were actually made independently. The relationship with the industry (Tobis, Ufa, Deutsche Universal, Gaumont-Franco-FilmAubert, Hapag), with hardware manufacturers and electronical companies (Siemens & Halske, Philips, AEG, Bata, Shell) with state agencies that were becoming increasingly important in the 1930s (Grierson’s film units in Britain, the increasingly firm grip of the Nazi party on filmmaking in Germany, the French popular front in 1936–38, Soviet state productions, New Deal filmmaking in the United States), political positions had to be reconsidered after the peak of 1929. It turned out that the avantgarde and the film societies as a movement were not able to reconcile the divergent meanings and positions. Yet, besides material traces in publishing and filmmaking it was the vast, trans-European network that first attempted seriously to theorise film and its foundations. The energy did not evaporate or vanish, but it transformed according to the laws of thermo dynamics: the functional differentiation in which archives were founded, the cinema became a concern of the national state and the documentary became institutionalised as a genre were a result of the ciné-club and avant-garde movement of the 1920s in which their energy has been recycled and preserved. Some other examples of the migrating energy in the networks of the film avant-garde will be addressed in the following chapter: publishing, theorising, and teaching.

While the first generation of the interwar period had to overemphasise the division between film as art and film as commerce in order to obtain the status of art for film (they mainly supported films as distant from popular taste as possible), the second generation of the 1950s had to break that distinction down again, claiming the artistic value of Hollywood genre cinema. In a way, the politique des auteurs was already around in the 1920s as photogenie, the practices of cinephilia and auteurism were only rigidly systematised later. While the first generation of critics had to overstress the distortion of reality as the key element of cinema that distinguished it from theatre and painting, as can be found in the theoretical writings of Rudolf Arnheim, Béla Balázs or Sergei Eisenstein, the second generation after World War Two went back to realism as a key concept, as is most evident in the theories of André Bazin and (the post-war writings of) Siegfried Kracauer. Thus, in the 1920s and in the first half of the 1930s people opted for an approach that would stress the difference of cinema from other art forms and for
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film's ability to distort reality whereas the post-war generation returned to an approach that would see the main value of cinema in its similarity to other forms of representation.

In a comparable fashion, theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have mapped out an international cycle of social struggles from the 19th century to their present of the last years of the 20th Century. The phase I have been describing here fits into their categorisations of developments: »A second wave arose after the Soviet revolution of 1917, which was followed by an international progression of struggles that could only be contained by fascisms on one side and reabsorbed by the New Deal and antifascist fronts on the other.«

Seen in this light, the 1920s and early 30s were a moment of crisis – and crisis is always also a moment of potentiality for change and transformation – with the generated energy being channeled into different developments: documentary film, reformist projects, film archives, film work in the service of the state – from communist to socialdemocrat, conservative and fascist. Strategic convergence and functional differentiation were inextricably linked as one contained the seed for the others and they alternated in long cycles when the differentiation of the 1930s fed into the next upsurge of the avant-garde after World War Two in the 1960s and 1970s.

1 Bertolt Brecht, Slatan Dudow, Georg M. Höllering, Kaspar, Ernst Ottwald, Robert Scharfenberg: »Tonfilm >Kuhle Wampe oder Wem gehört die Welt?«. In: Bertolt Brecht: Gesammelte Werke. Vol. 18: Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst I. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1967: 210-212. [»Of course the organisation of work is much more troublesome than the (artistic) work itself, i.e., we increasingly considered the organisation an indispensable part of artistic work. This was only possible since the work as a whole was political.«, my trans.]


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8 Thomas Elsaesser: »Realität zeigen: Der frühe Film im Zeichen Lumière«. In: Ursula von Keitz, Kay Hoffmann (eds.): Die Einübung des dokumentarischen Blicks. Fiction Film and Non Fiction Film zwischen Wahrheitsanspruch und expressiver Sachlichkeit 1895-1945. Marburg: Schüren 2001: 27-50, hier 28. »While considering, what cinema really is, things that appear self-evident remain unseen. Is it a number of photographies containing movement, pictures that are sketched or photographed, mechanically driven, thereby creating the impression of continuous movement? [...] Is it the projected picture or the exhibition of living pictures in front of a paying audience? [...] There are [...] at least [...] two dozens [...] candidates.«, my trans.


11 See Gauthier, passion: 14-16 (»Prologue: La première séance«).

12 See »annexe no. 2: Le premier »Ciné-Club de France« et les »Matinées de Cinéa«. In: Gauthier, passion: 344f.


16 Even the protagonists of the second wave of the cinephilia, the Nouvelle Vague, temporarily connected criticism to filmmaking. Most of them ended their theoretical and critical engagement once they had established themselves as filmmakers. The possible exception here is Jean-Luc Godard who retained an avant-gardist stance in his strategic interventions in public debates, in his changes of material and his overall partisan stance even after he had firmly established himself as a filmmaker.

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20 For a contemporary overview of the Parisian screening situation see Jean Lenauer: »The Cinema in Paris«. In: *Close Up*, vol. 3, no. 6, December 1928.


24 Quoted in Montagu, Old Man’s Mumble, op.cit., 1975: 220.


26 Wollen, Lovell, Rohdie, Interview with Montagu, op.cit.: 71.


28 See the manifesto »Het gaat om de film«. In: *Filmliga*, no. 1, September 1927. [»Once in a hundred times we see: the film. For the rest we see: cinema«, my trans.]


31 See the documents reprinted in Kühn et al., *Film und revolutionäre Arbeiterbewegung*, op.cit., vol. 2: 203–207.


33 Berger, Erobert, 1977: 16.


36 Willy Achsel: »Eine Anregung«. In: *Film-Kurier*, vol. 5, no. 101, 2.5.1923. »The quintessence of propaganda must culminate in this claim: Support the audience as a whole in raising its expectations and go to the cinema often, then the kitsch will slowly disappear. In the end the audience always gets what it desires.«, my trans.]

37 For a detailed account of the organisation of the travels of ambulant cinema programmes see »Rundschreiben der KPD zur Aktivierung der revolutionären Filmpropaganda«. Reprinted in and quoted after: Kühn et al., *Film und revolutionäre Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. 2, 1975: 213–217. See moreover my chapter »Vanishing point Soviet Union«.


39 For a detailed contextualisation of this event see the micro-study by Holger Wilmesmeier: *Deutsche Avantgarde und Film. Die Filmmatinee »Der absolute Film«. (3. und 10. Mai 1925)*. Münster, Hamburg: Lit Verlag 1993. Wilmesmeier has collected an impressive wealth of material, yet many of his conclusions are debatable.


41 In fact, the society was already announced in late 1927, see *Film-Kurier*, vol. 9, no. 252, 25.10.1927, but seems to have been inactive until January 1928 even though in November a first programme is announced: »Die erste Matinee der Gesellschaft Neuer Film wird bereits in der letzten Novemberwoche stattfinden. Ort der Veranstaltung wird voraussichtlich ein von der Ufa zur Verfügung gestelltes Theater sein.« (Film-Kurier, vol. 9, no. 265, 9.11.1927) Announced are scenes by Léger, Picasso [sic], Cavalcanti, Eggingel, Ruttmann and music by Hindemith and Bergier.


44 Hans Richter: *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe*. Zürich: Verlag Die Arche 1967: 145. [Everywhere in Europe people were becoming very conscious of the film avant-garde. [...] Between Paris, Holland, and Berlin an international exchange of films, people and articles was taking place. Since all of my films were screened at the »Studio des Ursulines«, and also shown in Holland, I felt included, but also responsible to do something about our European movement in Germany. [...] Thus, we [Karl Freund, Guido Bagier and me] established in 1926/27 the society »Neuer Film«.«, my trans.]


46 Redactie: »Het eerste Ligajaar«. In: *Filmliga*, no. 12, August 1928: 12.
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51 »Volksfilmverband. Gründungsauftrag von Januar 1928«. In: Archiv Akademie der Künste, Heinrich-Mann-Archiv, Mappe Volks-Film-Verband. Reprinted in and quoted after: Stattkino, Revolutionärer Film, op.cit.: 14. [We do neither want nor demand high-flown experiments. We do not have an education-craze steeped in aesthetics and literature. We know that cinema primarily wants and ought to be a place of relaxation and entertainment. But we think, that entertainment does not mean ›trash‹, that relaxation is not the same as ›intellectual poverty‹. Our fight is directed against artistic trash, intellectual poverty and not the least also against the political and social reaction, that all too often puts its stamp on today’s film production. Our fight has as its aim to make film what it could and should be: a means to disseminate knowledge, enlightenment and education, thoughts, ideas – means for understanding among the people and for reconciliation – a lively factor of everyday life as well as of intellectual and artistic life.«, my trans.]


53 Richter is only mentioned once in a list of participants at La Sarraz (Film und Volk, vol. 2, no. 8, October 1929: 3). Given Richter’s status at the time as one of the key figures in Germany this is surprising and can be only explained as a rivalry between the different organisations. Karl Freund is mentioned once (Film und Volk, vol. 1, no. 2, April 1928: 12) in an essay on DIE ABENTEUER EINES ZEHNMARKSCHREINS (DE 1926, Berthold Viertel).


57 Anon.: »Die bedrohte Pariser Avant-Garde«. In: Film-Kurier, vol. 10, no. 119/120, 19.5.1928.

58 See for some detailed numbers the statistics accompanying some of Montagu’s reflections; »Extra List for Statisticophiles«. In: Sight & Sound, autumn 1975: 224.

59 It was this economic threshold built into the Film Society membership fee that contributed to the foundation of workers’ film clubs around 1929, see below.

I am aware that "commercial art cinema" is a term that is not contemporary to the interwar period, but a concept that emerged in the 1960s. I am using the expression in the sense that has been suggested by Thomas Elsaesser: *Weimar Cinema and After. Germany's Historical Imaginary*. London, New York: Routledge 2000: passim.

Wollen, Lovell, Rohdie, Interview with Montagu, op.cit.: 73. See also Boost, *Ciné-Club*, op.cit.: 55.


See Berliner Volkszeitung, vol. 76, no. 89, 22.2.1928; as quoted by Tümmler, »Geschichte«, op.cit.: 1229.

Both speeches were reprinted in the magazine of the society. See Béla Balázs: »Der Film arbeitet für uns!«. In: *Film und Volk*, no. 1, March 1928: 6–8; Heinrich Mann: »Film und Volk«. In: *Film und Volk*, no. 2, April 1928: 4–6.


See the programmatic statement by Rudolf Schwarzkopf, general secretary of the VFV: »Unser Ziel und unser Weg.« In: *Film und Volk*, 1. Heft, März 1928: 4f.


[»unpleasant and harmful polemics. [...] Generally speaking, we want to advertise and work quietly in the future and approach the public only once our preparations are far enough.«, my trans.]

See the open letter by the *Volksfilmverband*: »Der Verband will ins Kino«. In: *Film-Kurier*, vol. 10, no. 296, 13.12.1928.

See –e–: »Russische Film-Matinee. Die Künstler sprechen«. In: *Lichtbild-Bühne*, vol. 22, no. 11, 14.1.1929. [»well-chosen and edited clips«, my trans.]

anon: »Die Wunder des Films. Sondervorstellung des Volks-Film-Verbandes im Tauentzienpalast«. In: *Lichtbild-Bühne*, vol. 22, no. 29, 4.2.1929. [»to give the public an insight in the varied materials of film production.«, my trans.]  

Rudolf Arnheim: »Erich von Stroheim in der Kamera«. In: *Das Stachelschwein*, no. 8, August 1928: 50-53; reprinted in and quoted after R.A.: *Kritiken und Aufsätze zum Film*. (edited by Helmut H. Diederichs). Frankfurt/Main: Fischer 1979: 204-208, here 205. [»May the dear God give the unfaithful a sign and the »Camera« a whole-page advertisement in his heaven, so that the public may come in masses.«, my trans.]


Léon Moussinac: »Les amis de Spartacus«. In: *Cinéma 74. Le guide du spectateur*, no. 189, July-Aug 1974: 73. [»all films, new or old, censored or not, expressing beauty or technical, artistic, ideological or educational truths«, my trans.]


Ibid.: 272.

See »Ein neues Avantgardekino in Paris«. In: *Film-Kurier*, vol. 12, no. 256, 29.10.1930.
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too for a popular front against bad, untruthful and reactionary film. This movement includes all progressive elements no matter to which political party they belong.«, my trans.

See Hogenkamp, Bond, op.cit.: 22. See more on the connection between Grierson, Soviet cinema and the evolution of the documentary in chapters five and six on the Soviet Union and on documentary.


See Woll, Lovell, Rohdie, Interview with Montagu, op.cit.: 91; 94f.

Hogenkamp, Interview met Montagu, op.cit.: 26. »People that were active in what can be called the Popular Front movement: actions against Hitler, against Franco, for the peace before the war began«, my trans.

See Samson, Film Society, op.cit.: 311.


See »Kamera« bleibt Repisenkino«. In: Kinematograph, vol. 23, no. 49, 27.2.1929.


See Rudolf Schwarzkopf: »Unser Ziel und unser Weg«. In: Film und Volk, vol. 1, no. 1, March 1929: 5.

anon.: »In eigener Sache! (Volks-Film-Verband)«. In: Film und Volk, vol. 2, no. 9/10, November 1929: 4. »No high profile production plans – but rather transformation / towards practical plans, / Strengthening work amongst working film friends / Active fight against reactionary film and film trash that today is in great demand.«, my trans.


See »Mitteilungen des Volksverbandes für Filmkunst«. In: Film und Volk, vol. 1, no. 2, April 1928: 22f. »The Volksverband für Filmkunst is left, but neutral in terms of party politics. It wants to form a popular front against bad, untruthful and reactionary film. This movement includes all progressive elements no matter to which political party they belong.«, my trans.

See Willy Haas: »Der Volksverband für Filmkunst«. In: Film-Kurier, vol. 10, no. 52, 29.2.1928.


104 Tümmler, Geschichte, op.cit.: 1233. [»The front line will be marked: »The enemy is on the right — also the film enemy!« Thanks to this concept it was possible to create such a broad, democratic front from communists to the Deutsche Demokratische Partei, at least its left wing. Through this the VFV — this comparison should be used carefully as it was only in the developing phase and had its specific character — became a model of the popular front on the cultural field.«, my trans.]


106 See »Eine deutsche Liga für unabhängigen Film«. In: Film-Kurier, vol. 12, no. 115, 15.5.1930. The board consisted of Dr. Blumenthal, Dr. Feld, Dr. Flesch, Werner Graeff, Paul Hindemith, Arthur Hollitscher, Dr. Marianoff, Mies van der Rohe, Asta Nielsen, Carl Nierendorf, Lotte Reiniger, Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann.

107 See »Avant Garde-Studio in München«. In: Kinematograph, vol. 24, no. 109, 12.5.1930.

108 For activities in Munich see »Konsolidierung des künstlerischen Schaffens? Film-Vorträge in der Münchener Universität«. In: Film-Kurier, vol. 12, no. 112, 12.5.1930; »Verbandsleben: Die Liga in München«. In: Film-Kurier, vol. 12, no. 122, 23.5.1930; »Münchener Liga für unabhängigen Film«. In: Film-Kurier, vol. 24, no. 119, 23.5.1930; »Werbeabend der Film-Liga in München«. In: Film-Kurier, vol. 12, no. 126, 28.5.1930.


111 Thomas Tode: »Hans Richter«. In: CineGraph – Lexikon zum deutschsprachigen Film. Inst. 35. München: edition text + kritik 2001: 88. [on a limited level in developed into a critical organisation of spectactors with intelligent programmes and a modest distribution system of league films«, my trans.]


116 It has to be remembered that the Soviet cinema up to 1928 was dominated by commercial productions, either from Hollywood or homemade. The NEP (new economic policy) forced artists, entrepreneurs, and institutions alike to follow strictly capitalistic rules. It was only in 1927 that the party began to think about the economics of the cinema industry in a more straightforward »socialist« way. In a slow process which is documented by Eberhard Nembach in Statins Filmpolitik. Der Umbau der sowjetischen Filmindustrie 1929 bis 1938. St. Augustin: Garde! Verlag 2001 the transformation of the film sector took place over the first half of the 1930s until the increasingly repressive policy culminated in the Stalinist purges 1936–38. The restructuring began seriously in
March 1928 with the Party conference on cinema which resulted in the first 5-year plan for the cinema (until 1933). The extended itineraries of the Soviet luminaries could be seen in this context as work at home was increasingly more regulated by the party. See also chapter five on the »Vanishing Point Soviet Union«.


120 See the overview given by Carl Vincent of production and exhibition activities in the alternative sector in: Close Up, vol. 5, no. 4, October 1929: 264-271.


123 In 1934 several societies are reported for Belgium. See Ludo Patris: »The Film Abroad: Activity in Belgium«. In: Cinema Quarterly, vol. 2, no. 4, Summer 1934: 233f.


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133 For an overview of Zlín and Bat'a see the website www.zlinbata.com.


135 Walter Benjamin: »Der Sturrealismus«. In: Die literarische Welt, vol. 5, no. 5, 1.2.1929: 3f. & vol. 5, no. 6, 8.2.1929: 4 and 15 & vol. 5, no. 7, 15.2.1929: 7f. Reprinted in and quoted after Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften. II.1. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1977: 295-310, here 296. [»There is always, in such movements, a moment when the original tension of the secret society must either explode in a matter-of-fact, profane struggle for power and domination, or decay as a public demonstration and be transformed.«, trans. Edmund Jephcott, One Way Street: 226]


137 Anon.: »Filmer aus Opposition. Avantgarde und Filmgeschäft«. In: Film-Kurier, vol. 11, no. 117, 24.7.1929. [»It is alarming that our avantgarde is obviously driven by inbred ideas. The strong talents are missing, the schools blossoming. One steals it from the other. That carousels circle, guys linger on fair grounds – how often has the eye seen this. What detours, what formal baggage is created for nothing. [...] A couple of experiments are squeezed out for the initiated, the best educated. The Snobgarde films.«, my trans.]


140 See Norman Wilson: »The Spectator«. In: Cinema Quaterly, vol. 1, no. 1, autumn 1932, 3-6, here 3.


145 See advertisement in Cinema Quaterly, vol. 1, no. 4, summer 1933: 194.

146 See as an example for London hfr.: »Der Schrei nach dem Repertoire-Theater. Die Theater der guten Filme in England«. In: Lichtbildbühne, vol. 22, no. 81, 5.4.1929.

147 The following account relies on Hogenkamp, Interview met Montagu, op.cit.: passim.

148 Ej. [=Ernst Jäger]: »Bertins Filmproduktion braucht ein Film-Studio. Aber es muß unter Aufsicht der Industrie arbeiten«. In: Film-Kurier, vol. 9, no. 255, 28.10.1927. [»Just as one will come together, in order to organize the joint export of German film fabrications to foreign countries, just so will the crucial companies cooperate in financing film experiments. These experiments will serve the production as a whole and will be under the control of the industry.«, my trans.]
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152 For a contemporary evaluation of the newly founded institution see R.S. Lambert: »The British Film Institute«. In: Cinema Quaterly, vol. 1, no. 4, summer 1933.
153 Montagu, Old Man's Mumble, op.cit.: 247.
155 Anon.: »Der deutsche Film fordert vom Staat«. In: Film-Kurier, vol. 10, no. 197, 18.8.1928.
157 Walter Ruttman: »Von kommender Filmkunst. Was die Avantgarde vom kommenden Jahr erhofft«. In: Film-Kurier, vol. 10, no. 1, 1.1.1928. »[The state] could for example start by building a film archive. Thereby it would establish the means to keep those important films accessible which failed to obtain a complete success. Should there once be a homeland for these orphans, the interested public would gather around them if the archive would be connected to the possibility to show the films. That would be the second important step and would mean: the establishment of a state cinema«, my trans.]
162 See for the special issue on Méliès La revue du cinéma, vol. 1, no. 4, 15 October 1929. See for a report of the screenings that took place on 16 December 1929 La revue du cinéma, vol. 2, no. 6, 1 January 1930: 72.
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Roud, Passion, op.cit. : 9f.


Translated and quoted by Roud, Passion, op.cit.: 11.

For a history of the film archive movement see Penelope Houston: Keepers of the Frame. The Film Archives. London: British Film Institute 1994.


For Hensel's film work before 1933 see the filmography in Thomas Hanna-Daoud: Die NSDAP und der Film bis zur Machtergreifung. Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau 1996.


Claude Vermorel in Pous Vous, no. 292, 21.6.1934. [»It is thanks to her that the programmes of France-Actualités is characterised by such objectivity, such honesty and such lucky choices that we have already signaled.«, my trans.]


I am discussing Shub's filmmaking in chapter five within the context of the Soviet cinema.

same time more egoistic and more altruistic. Egoistic because it is the personal expression of a pure idea; altruistic in its exclusive endeavours for the development of the medium. The real avant-gardistic film possesses the fundamental trait to contain under a sometimes opaque surface the germ of inventions that will lead the film on its way to its future form. The avant-garde is born from both: from the criticism of the present and from the anticipation of the future.«, my trans.] 183 Hogenkamp, Interview met Bond, op.cit.: 22. [»But we had not only reached a new public, but we had also brought forth a new manner of thinking, with many hundreds of enthusiasts. I think that our movement did not only begin something, but also created something of lasting value.«, my trans.] 184 Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri: Empire. Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press 2000: 51.