

Lotte Eisner: Archivist and Curator

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This thesis is a biographical study — an academic biography — exploring the life and work of my great-aunt, Lotte H. Eisner, film critic, writer, curator, archivist and with Henri Langlois, co-founder of the Cinémathèque française in Paris. This will be the first serious full-length critical study of the life and work of someone who is regularly named as a founding figure of post-war German film studies, as a moving force in post-war art cinema (through her work as an archivist at the Cinémathèque française) and as a key figure in exile intellectual history. Lotte Eisner was born and educated in Berlin where, during the 1920s, she worked as a film journalist until March 1933 when she was forced, after the Nazi seizure of power, to flee to Paris where she eventually settled and remained for the rest of her life, becoming a French citizen in 1955. After the war, Eisner worked as Chief Curator at the Cinémathèque française for forty years, responsible for building up an unrivalled collection of film and cinema artefacts whilst at the same time established a career as a film critic, jurist and writer, regularly contributing to established journals such as *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Recognised by the French government in 1982 when she received the Chevalier de l'Ordre National de la Légion d'Honneur and the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres, she is mentioned frequently in film studies literature and yet her presence in film historiography remains insecure.

When she died in 1983, Eisner left an extensive and as yet, unclassified archive; material spread amongst institutions such as the Cinémathèque française in Paris, the Deutsche Kinemathek in Berlin and the UCLA Library as well as a large cache of personal papers. The correspondence, texts and artefacts held in these collections reveals a vivid picture of Eisner and her work which, however, contrasts sharply with her presence in film scholarship where her three books,² numerous articles and film criticisms are cited and referenced frequently, various interviews are uploaded and freely available online and where it is evident that

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² Lotte H. Eisner, *L'Ecran démoniaque*, definitive edition (Paris: Eric Losfeld, Le Terrain vague, 1965); Lotte H. Eisner, *F.W. Murnau* (Paris: Le Terrain vague, 1964); Lotte H. Eisner, *Fritz Lang*, ed. by David Robinson (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1976).

she is greatly admired and respected. Equally she is discovered and re-discovered by generations of cinephiles in articles, books and blogs and yet, amongst all this, there is almost nothing scholarly of any length *about* Eisner — not one article, not one monograph and no critical biography.

Rather, film scholarship takes a somewhat uncritical and overly reverential approach to her, which in turn places a disproportionate emphasis on Eisner the writer and film critic and dismisses or ignores her forty years professional role as archivist and curator at the Cinémathèque française where she built up an extraordinary collection of pre-war films, scripts, set designs, music, *maquettes* and costumes. In fact one of the central points that will emerge is precisely the symbiotic nature of Eisner's work at the Cinémathèque française (her day job) and its influence and underpinning of her first major piece of writing — *L'Ecran Démoniaque* (*The Haunted Screen*). It was because she was able to view the films that she was able to write the book. Aside from this forgotten contribution to film archiving, Eisner is also habitually contextualised by, and referenced in relation to, various charismatic male figures such as Henri Langlois, Fritz Lang and Werner Herzog so it appears that film history scholars have bypassed any intellectual engagement with Eisner's writing, ignored her life's work in the film archives and as a result created a mythic, legendary figure — a *grande dame* of German film history — who is venerated and who now appears mainly as a reference or citation or as a great figure but in relation to someone else.³

So Eisner's is a story in German film history in which paradoxically she is both notably present and yet also notably absent. But this is not an argument or a story of someone 'lost and found' in film history nor is it a case of a woman's 'hidden history' being newly discovered, because Eisner was a conspicuous and public figure and all the facts and information about Eisner's life are available in plain sight. Instead, by using correspondence from the Cinémathèque française and from her personal papers, I will argue that Eisner throughout her life *was* very visible but that her public role and day to day job as collector and curator at the Cinémathèque française obscured the genuine contribution she was making both to film history and to the film archives by laying down and 'writing' the foundations of the archive itself. I will also suggest that this disregard of Eisner as an important collector and archivist is symptomatic of a gender issue specific to the historiography of film which has so far, failed to recognise the collaboration and contribution of work carried out whilst overshadowed by a 'great man' and that as a result, once Eisner had developed a reputation as a writer she was written out of film history as a collector.

³ An example of this is Werner Herzog who was a close friend and who constantly refers to Eisner in his writings and interviews explaining her significance to him and his filmmaking. As recently as 2016 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhc8u850eNk>) he says: '[...] she was charismatic [...] she gave me courage, she gave me legitimacy'.

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Using material from archives across the world and her (recently obtained) personal archive of papers, this thesis will be the first serious study to critically address and attempt to counterbalance the uneven and unbalanced accounts that frame Eisner's life and work.