

Transmission at the Cinémathèques

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between Henri Langlois and João Bénard da Costa is at the heart of the influence that the Cinémathèque Française exerted over the Portuguese Cinematheque, as well as of the transmission and circulation of ideas and programming models at play between both institutions. Commenting on some of the characteristic traits of both Langlois and da Costa, this essay also traces the evolution of the Portuguese Cinematheque, founded in 1958. Langlois's support was key during a period of great economic hardship, under the directorship of Manuel Félix Ribeiro, and further extended since da Costa became a regular collaborator. In particular, the article mentions the important retrospective dedicated to Roberto Rossellini in 1973, just before the Carnation Revolution that overthrew the dictatorship in Portugal in 25 April 1974. Furthermore, the author elaborates on the similarities and differences between both film programmers, and in particular analyses programmes based on the relationships or 'secret links' between films, from the early programmes created by Langlois in the 1930s to da Costa's later programmes, such as 'Lang in America' (1983) and 'Variations on Oz' (1992).

KEYWORDS

Henri Langlois, João Bénard da Costa, Portuguese Cinematheque, programming criteria, Auteur theory, film seasons, Roberto Rossellini, spectator.

—What is your dearest dream?
 —To die during a screening.
 Dialogue from *Brigitte et Brigitte* (1966),
 by Luc Moullet

Henri Langlois (1914–77) was the real inventor of the profession of film programming and can also be considered the greatest film programmer, or at least the most influential. This probably has to do with the fact that he was also the greatest cinephile of all times. Langlois transformed his passion for cinema in a way of living and knew, better than anyone else, how to transmit it. This is why he wrote part of the history of cinema: he taught to see because he enabled to see. Thanks to his programmes, the films mentioned in books, in the histories of cinema and in the filmographies acquired a form of reality. Langlois, who awoke so many vocations (for cinephiles, programmers, filmmakers) was a self-taught man, as so many generations of cinephiles who succeeded him – even those who held institutional positions as programmers had often undertaken studies in other fields at university. One of his adversaries, MoMA's Richard Griffith, criticised him in privately saying, 'he is not an archivist, or a historian, he is only... an enthusiast!' When he found out about the comment, Langlois found very funny that enthusiasm was considered a negative quality and saw in this argument a justification of his own despise for his colleague at MoMa (ROUD, 1983: 133). Langlois wasn't someone to prompt consensus, he rather stirred up unconditional friendships or lethal hatred. And Langlois himself divided the world up between friends and enemies, people with whom he shared affinities, and whom he trusted and others that he mistrusted. Naturally it was

possible for a friend to become an enemy, but the opposite was more unlikely. With some, he could be very generous, but he would not give anything in to others, 'with his extraordinary mix of inspiration and preconceived ideas, generosity and envy', as Jacques Ledoux, from the Belgian Cinémathèque, would say after his death, adding: 'he was at the origin of many Cinémathèques (even the one I run), and this I shall never forget' (ROUD 1983: 205)¹. The Portuguese Cinémathèque is amongst the many small and poor institutions with which Langlois was extremely generous, and upon which he still casts a shadow today. Founded in 1958, thanks to the passion and efforts of Manuel Félix Ribeiro (1906–82), who was its director until his death, this Cinémathèque only started to work in decent conditions in the 1980s, when it ceased being poor and started to cease being small. Between 1958 and 1980, the Portuguese Cinémathèque didn't enjoy the conditions to show regular programmes, and could only afford to show two or three seasons per year. Henri Langlois, for pure cinephilic friendship with Félix Ribeiro, created three filmic and cultural events in Lisboa in the first half of the 1960s. Three big silent cinema seasons, one dedicated to French cinema (1962), another one to German cinema (1963) and the third to American cinema (1965). These seasons, programmed by Langlois with his own films copies, brought together films that he regularly showed in Paris, but which had never been shown in Lisboa in that way, brought together under a historical and cinephilic perspective.

1. Roud also cites the testimony of Françoise Jaubert (daughter of Maurice Jaubert), to whom Ledoux said:

'Langlois was also my father, as well as he was yours.'

Amongst the people involved in the Portuguese Cinémathèque, Langlois's had a particularly strong relationship with João Bénard da Costa (1935–09), who granted the institution with a prestige and international projection unknown before his time. Cinephile and strongly influenced by French culture, Bénard didn't have the opportunity to see the great classics during his formative years, because they were absolutely inaccessible in Lisboa during the 1950s and 60s, due to political censorship, poverty and the country's isolation more generally. For instance, in 1958, when he was 23 and made his first trip to Paris, Bénard ran to 'Langlois's Cinémathèque to kill the thirst of years': he could finally see *The Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets Potyomkin*, Sergei M. Eisenstein, 1925). In other visits to Paris, alongside new films that he knew he would never be able to see in Portugal, he saw many classics at the Cinémathèque Française, which thus ceased being imagined films and became real films. He observed: 'how to explain (...) the emotion that filled you once you entered the room (...) knowing that you would finally see *The Battleship Potemkin*, *Birth of a Nation* (David W. Griffith, 1915), *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (Friedrich W. Murnau, 1927) or *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (*La passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928), on which we had so much read, seen dozens of photographs, and now they were there before our eyes, on a cinema screen? That can only be lived, not told' (DA COSTA 1986: 30). Eleven years after that first visit as a spectator to the Cinémathèque Française, João Bénard joined the film department at the Foundation Calouste Gulbenkian, which he started to programme in 1971. But his true debut as a film programmer took place in November 1973, with a Roberto Rossellini retrospective, organised with the help of Henri Langlois, who may well have been the real programmer of the season. Langlois came to Lisboa for the opening screening, together with Rossellini, who was his personal friend, and a usual suspect in Paris but it was an extraordinary

luxury to see him in Lisboa. Even if the fact that the programme took place at the well-funded Gulbenkian Foundation had probably sharpen Langlois's interest, whose Cinémathèque lived under a permanent state of crisis over the last years, it can still be seen as an example of the generosity of which he was capable. However, something transformed the opening of this Rossellini season into an exceptional event. Four months before the Carnation Revolution that overthrew Salazar's regime, the opening screening became a small political demonstration: at the end of *Roma, Open City* (*Roma, città aperta*, 1945), the audience stood up, enthusiastic, and amongst the applauses to Rossellini, one could hear people shouting 'hall freedom!' and 'down with fascism'. The ministers attending the screening left the room immediately. This was the first professional contact between Henri Langlois and João Bénard da Costa.

From then onwards, João Bénard developed a personal and professional friendship with Langlois and his wife, Mary Meerson, and he identified himself with the founder of the Cinémathèque Française to the point that until the end of his days he would always have a framed photograph of himself and Langlois in his office. It is true that both men shared similar traits (a liking of secrets, a certain dose of paranoia, perhaps more theatrical in Langlois and more spontaneous in Bénard), but they also had important differences. Langlois was chaotic and behaved himself as an eccentric outcast, whereas Bénard didn't turn up his nose at formalisms and protocol. Even if he could be authoritarian at times, Langlois had a democratic temperament and even says in the *Anticours*²: 'None of my collaborators has to call me 'Monsieur le Directeur'. They can call me "shit"'. In this respect, João Bénard was completely different. From a certain moment, his form of programming acquired precise Langlois-like contours. But this only happened from 1980 onwards, when he started programming at the

2. *Les Anti-cours d'Henri Langlois (1976–77)*, by Harry Fischbach, four hours and fifteen minutes of interviews

with Langlois, produced by the television of Ontario (Canada).

Portuguese Cinémathèque. Throughout the first nine years at the Gulbenkian Foundation, João Bénard didn't programme on a regular basis, which obliged him to be very imaginative. At the Foundation, he programmed solid, integral monographic seasons: Mizoguchi, Rivette, Bresson, Truffaut. Langlois also programmed monographic seasons, but alternated them with other programmes. Most importantly, he didn't feel the need to organise the screenings in seasons. He would make the most unlikely pairings, since what was most important for him was to see films, as many as possible. His method consisted in lacking one and in rejecting criteria of 'good taste' or 'low' or 'high' culture. In the 1970s, Bénard organised three great seasons of American cinema (1930s, 40s and 50s), but programmed them in a didactic and chronological manner, showing only the great titles. Such a programme is no way Langlois-like but was very much needed in the Lisboa of the 1970s in order to produce an audience, whereas in Paris Langlois had the most cinephile audience worldwide, due to the exceptional offer in the cinemas across the city. In the 1970s, Bénard offered audiences in Lisboa films that had never been seen there before, or which had not been screened over the last twenty or thirty years, in order to offer a basic film education and be able to leap on a less conventional territory later on. Another crucial difference was that Bénard was an orthodox Auteurist, taking to its last consequences the Auteur Theory of the *Cahiers du cinéma* of the 1950s: for him, there were the elected few filmmakers, who formed part of a family, who could not commit any errors or make films that weren't great; and the damned ones, without hope. Langlois, on the other hand, was more of a *filmist* than an *Auteurist*. Furthermore, he played a key role in the formation of the first generation of critics at *Cahiers*, who had so crucially influenced Bénard himself: their position in relationship to critics and criticism was completely opposed.

However there is an important aspect in the conception of Langlois's programme that found a lasting echo in the activity of Joao Bénard:

the ludic aspect, the pleasure of composing the menu of films included in the programme. Langlois enjoyed programming for an imaginary spectator that would attend all the screenings in a day (and in 1950s and 60s Paris, this spectator did indeed exist). He thus imagined secret bridges between the most disparate films. The poetic intuition that led Langlois to programme for an imaginary spectator is already manifest in the first programme he organised, even before founding the Cinémathèque Française. In 1934 he rented a small room in the Champs Elysées that he called 'Le Cinéma Fantastique', and where he screened three feature films in a row and without any breaks: *The Fall of the House of Usher* (*La chute de la maison Usher*, Jean Epstein, 1928), *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, Robert Wiene, 1920) and *The Last Warning* (Paul Leni, 1929). Still in the 1930s, he screened double bills such as *Shoulder Arms* (Charles Chaplin, 1918) and *An Italian Straw Hat* (*Un chapeau de paille d'Italie*, René Clair, 1928). Eric Rhode observed that the influence that Langlois exerted on the members of the future Nouvelle Vague during their formative years, in the second half of the 1940s, was not only due to the amount of films that he showed, but also to how he showed them. 'Langlois showed three films per day, creating unexpected but revealing juxtapositions, such as screening an Eisenstein before a Walsh or a Hitchcock after a Mizoguchi. His regular spectators were the first ones to have their sensibility immersed in the history of cinema since its very beginning.' (*A History of Cinema*, 1969, quoted in ROUD, 1983). In 1963 Langlois brought to the New York Film Festival the then very rare *L'Âge d'or* (Luis Buñuel, 1930), but preceded its screening with something very different: a selection of films by the Lumière brothers. The audience didn't like the mix very much and was impatient during the screening. Langlois then said to Richard Roud, the director of the festival: 'don't ever forget that one programme for a 10 per cent of the public. Nothing matters, as long as that per cent is happy'. (ROUD, 1983: 130)

João Bénard also appreciated this sort of programme, he also enjoyed proposing clues that only he knew and which could sometimes become private jokes. It wasn't a form of imitation but of filiation, one of the marks of the relationship between those two men, born twenty years apart and who nevertheless had a very intense relationship between six brief years. When Bénard took a certain distance from the monographic season, which were his main passion, he established imaginary bridges between the films, just as Langlois would also do. In the 1983 season 'Fritz Lang in America', he didn't present the films in a chronological order, but rather in chapters, an ordering that required that spectators followed the whole programme in order to perceive its meaning: nine films on guilt, five on absolute evil, four on adventure, to finish with 'four works *sui generis* that will articulate these circumstances: *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947), *Clash by Night* (1952), *The Blue Gardenia* (1953), *Human Desire* (1954). This we begin with guilt and finish with desire.' In 1992 he organised a programme titled 'Variations on Oz', since he considered *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming et al, 1939) 'a superb metaphor of cinema, its Ovidian metamorphosis, one of the most subtle "films on

films" of the history of cinema' (DA COSTA, 2008). This 1992 season was programmed for the imaginary spectator who would leave a screening only to enter into another diptych or triptych: *The Wizard of Oz* and *From the Life of the Marionettes* (*Aus dem Leben der Marionetten*, Ingmar Bergman, 1980); *Belle de Jour* (Luis Buñuel, 1967) and *The Night of the Iguana* (John Huston, 1964); *Moonfleet* (Fritz Lang, 1955), *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and *Mouchette* (Robert Bresson, 1967). In this context, a film gained meaning – or another meaning – when placed next to another one.

If all spectators and film programmers are Henri Langlois's children, many are unaware of this because, as François Truffaut said, 'Langlois only believed in education by osmosis' (and he added: 'And so do I.'). João Bénard da Costa was completely aware that he was a cinephile and a son of Langlois via *cinephilia*, a *ciné-fils* (to use Serge Daney's expression). He had a very strong character and this is precisely why instead of hiding the influence Langlois had on him, He knew that this situated him amongst those who programme films as their passion and want to communicate that passion because they are *enthusiasts*.

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He contributed to the *Dictionnaire du Cinéma Mondial* (Éditions du Rocher), *Dictionnaire – 900 Cinéastes Français* (Éditions Bordas) and *Journeys of Desire* (British Film Institute). In 2008 he sobre las representaciones de Rio de Janeiro in cinema, and in 2010 *João Bénard da Costa – Um Programador de Cinema*. Since 2011 he is a programming adviser of Cinecoa, a cinema festival in Vila Nova da Foz Côa (Portugal).

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