

DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH: JAY LEYDA (JL)
INTERVIEWERS: CARL COLBY (CC); RUTH CUMMINGS (RC)
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CC: Well, the other part—

JL: Easy to visualize, too.

CC: The other people are—there are some fighters for all the departments.

JL: Most of the Museum doesn't know there is a Film Department, and that's been from the beginning. So don't put a big emphasis on the Film Department; it will put all the others out of joint.

RC: [Laughs] Well, we'd like to—

CC: What's interesting is that the Museum, or, when you think "museum," people primarily think of painting and sculpture, just by training or because they think of the museums as mausoleums where they have older art. But when you look at the Modern—

JL: Well, Alfred Barr changed all that.

CC: He really did. When did you first become aware of the Museum and what it was doing?

JL: When it had its first exhibitions in the Heckscher Building.

RC: Can you tell us something about that? We're loving to hear people's memories of those days.

JL: The very first one was—well, the thing that surprised me were the [Paul] Cezannes. I had never seen more than one Cezanne at a time. And usually in reproduction. So here was an exhibition of Cezanne, [Paul] Gauguin, [Vincent] van Gogh, and someone else [[Cezanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh](#)]. But it was

the Cezannes that wowed me. And this was an office building. They were quite willing to do the best work under the worst circumstances. And it was Alfred who did everything, really, who pushed everything into movement.

CC: You were probably one of the few people who shared with him having visited the Soviet Union in the—well, he had been—

JL: We were not there at the same time.

CC: No; he was there in the mid-twenties, wasn't he? And you were there in 1930, '31?

JL: He came in '27.

CC: What do you think he learned out of his visit to the Soviet Union?

JL: Have you read his diary?

CC: I've read a number of his

JL: The Russian diary, I mean.

CC: No, I didn't read the Russian diary.

JL: It's in an issue of *October*. I think it's Number 3 or 4, one of the very early issues.

CC: Do you think he began to see art though as [glitch] since the Soviet Union at that time, painting, sculpture, film, photography, graphic design, were all—

JL: I think he had formed this—

CC: Early, very early on?

JL: —unity of all arts as a student. You know, he studied under Paul Sachs, and Paul Sachs is not a thin channel, either. And he gave something to all of his students. I think Jere Abbott was in that same class. And it was Alfred and Jere Abbott who came to Moscow hoping to see things that they had only heard about, and they saw quite a lot, and they saw the people.

CC: Was film regarded as very much an art [form] in the Soviet Union when you arrived in the early thirties, or was it—?

JL: Not particularly by the audience.

- CC: But by the cultural establishment?
- JL: Yes, oh yes. It was a pride of the formalists, especially [to] someone like [Viktor] Shklovsky. I did a lot of work in films, too, so it wasn't a disgrace, as it was at that time in other countries, to dabble in films and to be interested in them.
- CC: Were the Russians, you think, one of the first groups that was champion—? For instance, from Iris Barry's point of view, was she as accepting of international film as she was of, let's say, Hollywood pictures?
- JL: Oh, I think so, and I think it was Alfred who pushed her into that rounded view.
- RC: And how about the Americans in comparison with the Europeans, as far as the acceptance of film as art? Do you think there was a group that was ready to take it on? Do you think the attitude was here, or did the Museum—?
- JL: A very small group.
- RC: So that the Museum's first foray into film, was there an audience once they hit off with it, or—?
- JL: Well, apparently, a lot of people had been waiting for such a thing without showing any personal interest in it before the Museum did. Iris's first lectures were not at the Museum—and this was before there was a Museum and before there was a Film Department, of course, too—at the Hartford Athenaeum. I think the man who made that possible is still alive. I don't think he's the director of the Athenaeum any more. But there were such spots around. Some of them were located on campuses, but it was a very thin activity and a very irregular activity until there was one institution that it concentrated on. I'm not quite sure when Eastman House started with film, but that could have been the only other substantial interest in film being shown.
- CC: Was it very difficult for you to see pictures, let's say, in the 1930s and early forties? Was it [difficult] to see pictures that you were interested in studying? How would you have gone about, at that time, seeing pictures that were French or early—?
- JL: You mean mostly silent film?

- CC: Silent pictures and all? How did you manage? It must have been very frustrating.
- JL: I had a miraculous job. Someone realized that silent films were not being shown commercially, theatrically, successfully at all, so he hired a theater. He knew the whole repertoire of international silent films, and he hired a theater in the Bronx called the Bronx Playhouse. And I was hired to accompany the films with records. And to do that, you have to see the film, each time it's shown. So I was able to see something like *The Passion of Jeanne d'Arc* [[*La Passion de Jeanne s'Arc*](#)] 20 times in succession. And I didn't feel any starvation. So that all the best silent films were being shown there, for very small audiences, but still. And it went out of business in about six months. But in those six months, I had a lot of opportunities.
- RC: It sounds like it.
- CC: Did you immediately feel that Alfred Barr was going to be a soulmate in terms of helping along film as art, particularly in the early thirties when the Museum moved out of the Heckscher and began to; Iris came over, and—?
- JL: Oh yes. I can't remember now where we met, but wherever it was—was it before I went to the Soviet Union or after? I can't even remember that.
- RC: And what are your memories of meeting—? Could you characterize Alfred in your own words?
- CC: Was it unusual for an art person, a museum person, to accept film as art at that time?
- JL: Well, I didn't know museum people in general. My meeting with him must have been quite accidental. I think I knew friends of his, and you got invited to parties with him, and that's how it happened.
- RC: And what memories do you have of him?
- JL: He knew everything, and he was enthusiastic about everything. And he was determined that any institution that he helped form would have many sides, and not just painting and sculpture.
- CC: And you think that was a dream fulfilled?

JL: Yes, maybe it's over-fulfilled by this time. I don't know.

RC: At the time, was the film—? Since the film community as you're describing was quite small, ardent admirers of film, did the Museum become a meeting place for those of you in film? Did you go to the Museum often to kind of get contact with other film buffs? Or did that happen later?

JL: Well, films weren't being shown before I went. In fact, they were being shown under Museum circumstances only a year before I came back to work for them.

CC: When was that that you came back here?

JL: '36.

CC: Did you begin to put together their archive at that time?

JL: No. Iris hired me as her assistant, that was all.

CC: What did you do for her primarily?

JL: We both wrote notes [[Film Notes](#)] and worked on each other's notes. I think that helped to circulate the films. And my job, and my salary was being paid by the Rockefeller Foundation; my particular job was to write a history of Soviet film. Before my resignation was requested, I got quite a lot of it done. But then there was a cruel interval of several years before I could get started again. That's why I went to France.

CC: What happened? How was it terminated? I didn't know of that.

JL: How was my job terminated?

RC: Yes; what happened? Was it a political type of—?

JL: There were about four of us in different departments who were asked for their resignations the same day.

CC: By whom?

RC: By Alfred?

JL: Not by Alfred, not by Iris.

RC: Stephen Clark?

JL: And not even by the Rockefeller Foundation, but by the Board of Directors.

RC: And was that the time when Stephen Clark was around?

JL: Yes.

RC: Oh.

CC: Early forties? 1940 or something?

JL: Yes, and that coincided, of course, with the Cold War, which didn't help my stability much.

RC: Right.

CC: Why was it that you think your resignation was called for?

JL: Oh, well, it became unfortunately a very public matter. Someone [Seymour Stern] wrote a series of articles in a newspaper here about me.

RC: About the work you were doing?

JL: And they were mostly fantasy, but there was enough truth in them to worry the Board of Directors. And he sent marked copies of his articles, both to the Board of the Museum Directors, and the Board at the Rockefeller Foundation, to each member.

CC: So you found yourself in an uncomfortable position of writing a history of Soviet film that people took to be a glorification of the Soviet system?

JL: No. No one had read it by that time.

CC: They just knew you were doing it?

RC: Just knowing of your activity was enough to—?

JL: It was contracted for by a press that I won't name, and as soon as the bricks started falling, the contract was cancelled, and other contracts for similar books were cancelled, too.

CC: This was pre-war though, right before World War II?

JL: Mm-hm.

CC: People felt there was just a very tenuous area? Did Alfred try to support you?

JL: He couldn't.

CC: No [INAUDIBLE: 0:13:12].

RC: And the other members of the staff whose resignations were tendered at the same time?

JL: We ran into each other sometimes on the street.

RC: [Laughing] You had your own club, like the Salon des Refusés.

CC: It's interesting to us because we're just coming into it and what we try to do by asking you questions now and coming to see you today is to—

JL: Well, I just wanted to divert any feeling you had that the Museum was pure paradise.

CC: Sure.

RC: Well, see, and that's what we don't want to project in the film, because it isn't. It's a living institution.

CC: And the other thing is, is that it wouldn't make it an uninteresting film, too.

RC: Exactly. That's right.

JL: Actually, there was a film made about the Film Department by *The March of Time*, and it was very boring.

RC: They usually are, if there's just one point of view.

CC: We have an awful lot of people who will certainly say 'the emperor has no clothes;' Lincoln Kirstein and a number of other people.

JL: Well, that's not the point of maximum importance.

CC: No; what we're trying to do, though, is, one of the things we've been able to glean, and we're trying to get a fix on exactly what may have happened and what was the temperature of the time. It seemed that in the beginning, it was very much a family and very much almost a club atmosphere. It started as a family effort really, and then a small group, and then it was club-like in the early thirties

and as the thirties wore on. But just about 1940 and certainly by 1945 when certain people returned and tried to get the Museum established again—

JL: And it began with government connections during the war, too.

RC: That's interesting.

CC: And very institutional. It became extremely—what—?

JL: Rockefeller, was at the Pan-American Committee, [it] was located there. And most of its employees were also employees of the Museum, like [Luis] Buñuel. He was working on Rockefeller's Pan-American Committee as well as working for the Museum.

CC: So do you think it lost a lot of its freedom of spirit?

JL: All that had to happen to him was for [Salvador] Dalí to talk to—who was the cardinal at that time in New York? [Archbishop Francis Spellman]—saying that there was an atheist working at the Museum, and he lost his job very soon after that. After having been so proud to be an atheist.

RC: My goodness. How about—? Was Mrs. [Abby Aldrich] Rockefeller, did she appear at all while you were involved at the Museum? Did you have any contact?

JL: I didn't move in those circles. She was there a lot, and she had a great deal to do with its growth, with its purchases, with its committees.

RC: How about Nelson [Rockefeller]? Were you in contact with him at all?

JL: I wasn't in contact with that level at all. Not even at parties.

CC: I think it would be similar today.

JL: I don't think I ever shook his hand.

RC: So when you went off to France, and you were in Europe for, how many years before you came back to the United States?

JL: Well, we went in '57. A lot of things had happened in between. And got to China in '59. And we came back in—well, left China in '64. We heard the rumblings of

the Cultural Revolution approaching. And we left gracefully, too. Got another job in Germany, a similar job. I only got back in 1960.

RC: So then did you—?

CC: Where did you spend the War years, in World War II, if you left in 1940 the Museum?

JL: Most of my time in the Army was spent in Fort Knox. Because I was above a certain weight, I was automatically put into a tank. [RC laughs] That's why I won't drive anything anymore.

RC: After driving a tank?

CC: After driving a tank and feeling impervious?

JL: No, I didn't feel impervious. [Laughs]

CC: You can be a bad driver, I guess, if you drive a tank. [Laughs]

JL: No, the whole episode scared me. I didn't go abroad.

CC: When you were singled out, or at least the four of you were singled out—when you were dismissed from the Museum, did you feel very much that this was being directed at you personally? Or did you simply—?

JL: Well what was strange was, the reasons for the resignations were different in each case.

CC: Yours was because of your work?

JL: My far more red reputation.

CC: And nobody could stand up.

JL: And because I had lived for three years and studied for three years in the Soviet Union. That was enough already.

RC: After that letter was received, did you have any chance to discuss it with Alfred, any of the staff people, or it just was accepted and that was it?

JL: No, it was so clear that this had to be, to quiet everyone. I think the four—I think that was just a coincidence, or maybe one of us was the last straw on the subject.

CC: Who were the other three?

JL: I'm not telling you.

CC: Oh.

RC: Had there been rumblings of this? Did you fear for anything like this happening, or was this out of the blue? Or, how did they operate? See, we understood that the Museum at one time was small and pretty much everybody knew what was going on.

JL: Well, I was editing the magazine, so they knew about that. And I was also working as a film cutter weekends and nights for Frontier Films, and I don't think they knew about that. We all had pseudonyms, because all of us had other jobs.

CC: Sure. Because you weren't paid very well at the Museum.

JL: Well, there was no pay at Frontier Films.

CC: Oh, I see.

JL: But I wanted very much to do the work.

CC: What kind of pictures were being made at Frontier Films?

JL: I worked on *China Strikes Back* and [*People of the Cumberland*](#), and anything else that needed working on. I didn't work on *Native Land*. But the author of the damaging articles knew as much as he needed to know about that activity to use it well.

CC: So when you saw this coming, you knew that was—?

JL: When the articles began to appear, I knew it wouldn't be long.

CC: Did it have any further ramifications, or was it pretty much stopped there—I mean, then you went into the office?

JL: No.

CC: Then you waited, then?

JL: Then it went into other places. There was an offer made, a job in Canada at the National Film Board, and the author of the articles heard about it, and then the *Motion Picture Herald* ran an editorial accusing lots of people of making mistakes. Then I was supposed to be in the Signal Corps, in the Army, but I never got there. There was a tank between me and the Signal Corps.

CC: The Army, too, got wind of all this?

JL: Well, it was on my record, of course. The Capra unit wouldn't take another obstacle. They probably had plenty of obstacles already.

CC: What about your re-association with the Museum? When did you come back and reestablish any contact with them?

JL: Well, what I was doing abroad, mostly, in London, in Paris, in Berlin, and in Peking, [was] usually working for film archives, in three cases they were government film archives. And that became my profession, so that when a large country with a small new archive needed to know what to do about the films they had, I was someone who could advise them.

RC: So then did you reconnect direct back with Eileen Bowser?

JL: Well that was—it was clear, by that time, because there was an organization of the International Film Archives. And I would usually find myself at the meetings representing someone quietly.

CC: But you no longer ever worked with the Museum?

JL: No; no. I've done jobs for the Museum, but I have never worked for them.

RC: Was there support, however, from your fellow co-workers, though? They couldn't come out and say it publicly—

JL: Oh, commiserations aplenty, but—

CC: No active resistance or anything else.

JL: They couldn't really. I wasn't in New York about 10 years ago when there was a strike at the Museum, so I could only hear about it. But I heard things that I was sure couldn't have happened in the thirties.

RC: That's interesting; yes.

CC: The strike is something there that—

JL: Well, it was a huge institution by now. Then, it was a comparatively small place.

RC: Right.

CC: There must have been less than a hundred people in 1936?

JL: Oh, much less than a hundred.

CC: About 30 or so, probably, worked there; 30 or 40 at the most, including the guards?

JL: 30 or 40 would be much closer than a hundred.

CC: And that would be the guards and the physical staff?

JL: Mm-hm.

CC: So it was very clubby, I mean, you knew each other.

JL: Even when the new Museum was built [1939], it was still not over-populated by any means.

CC: In terms of the appreciation for, in, let's say, '36, '37, '38, were there regular showings of films by then? On a Wednesday afternoon, or an evening?

JL: As soon as the new Museum opened, of course it had an auditorium, and it was for that purpose. I can't imagine any other purpose more than the films that would have determined that auditorium.

CC: And was it the same kind of selection that you were selecting music for out in the Bronx? I mean, it was an intelligent selection of European pictures and early American silent?

JL: Mm-hm.

CC: And mostly silent?

JL: Not only. Iris had excellent taste in films, and a brave taste, too, so she would often discover new films that were being neglected, not just old films, and show them.

RC: So at the time, you would feature as well, current, contemporary film?

JL: Oh, [points to a document] these were the first program[s].

RC: Do you remember audiences being shocked at any time, or getting up in arms?

JL: Oh, audiences at the Museum have had certain diseases that were there at the beginning and are still there.

RC: [Laughing] Such a shock of the new, and that kind of—?

JL: Shock of the old. No; the important thing is to show that you're superior to those things on the screen. So you have to laugh. If you don't laugh, people think you're a snob of some sort. But it really is a form of snobbery, to laugh at silent films, or to laugh at old films. The efforts that we made to stifle the laughter, it just never worked.

RC: How would you try to stifle it?

JL: Oh, by asking certain very audible laughers to leave.

CC: People used to come and just yuck it up?

JL: It was always a free thing. You didn't have to spend any money on the film, so your ticket to the Museum was your entre into the auditorium, too. So people determined to get their money's worth—

CC: Would see everything.

RC: Just stay.

JL: —would venture into the auditorium without knowing what they were seeing there, or why they were there.

CC: And they'd come upon a silent movie, maybe a German one.

JL: And by that time it was necessary to laugh, to show your superiority to those foolish films.

RC: Oh, that's wonderful; you should take a look at this.

CC: So you really were in an atmosphere of very few kindred souls, though, at that time, who would have any great appreciation for the pictures?

JL: Well there were some, there were some. There always were some, from the beginning. And even before our offices, when I came back in '36—this is the Film Library, now the Film Department—we were housed on the floor of the Columbia Broadcasting building, and it was one of those long floors that have offices on each side. So the obvious place for the projection was in the corridor.

RC: [Laughing] Oh!

JL: So, we didn't have public showings there, but we brought friends there to see films that we thought they should see.

RC: That sounds pretty great.

JL: Oh, it was; it was!

RC: That must have been marvelous, to be able to have that kind of liberty.

JL: That was the first time that Jim Agee had ever seen a [Alexander] Dovzhenko film, for example.

RC: What other people who we might know, public figures now in film, have helped—?

JL: [Lewis] Milestone had decided to make [Ilya] Ehrenburg's novel, *The Love of Jeanne Ney*, but a very interesting film had been made of it, [G.W.] Pabst. So he came and saw it. These were usually evenings, partially secret, not very official.

RC: Right. And any other figures that we might know about, recognize now, who needed your help or you guided in their film educations?

JL: Well, very soon after that, there was the auditorium, and people like Sidney Meyers were dazzled by the [sirens blaring] range of films that were being shown at the Museum, so people naturally gave it a great deal of publicity. But I don't think that accounted for most of the audience. Most of the audience, I think were there by chance.

CC: And people would stumble in and see something like *Underworld*, for instance?

JL: Mm-hm.

CC: And they would laugh at that after?

JL: Well, it depends on how many years passed in between, how many years they were conscious of passing.

CC: These are all—I mean, I’ve seen, I have a particular interest in—

JL: These [points to a document] were the first circulating programs.

CC: I have a particular interest, obviously, in films, but something like *Underworld*, to me is an absolute masterpiece. I saw it at the American Film Institute once on five millimeter.

JL: They still think it’s [Josef von] Sternberg’s best film.

CC: It’s absolutely; it really is. The others are more—

JL: Did I do the note on *Underworld*?

CC: It doesn’t mention your name on *Underworld*, but it mentions—

JL: They’re all signed.

CC: Iris comes after *Cat and Canary* and *Underworld*. She doesn’t come under *Underworld*, she comes—

JL: Oh; I did *Little Caesar* or *Public Enemy*.

CC: Well, something like that couldn’t have gotten too much derision. *Little Caesar*, at least it’s a talkie and they’d recognize Edward G. Robinson in the late thirties. But they must have been surprised to see it in a museum.

JL: Perhaps. But it was a difficulty. But it doesn’t seem to have stopped anything.

RC: No. Would you say that in large measure, the Museum affected the American genre of film-making? Would you make any connection there?

JL: I’m not sure. An awful lot of people working in films now saw a range of films there that they couldn’t have seen otherwise.

RC: Right.

JL: So there must be some connection.

RC: Let me ask you something about that salary.

JL: I mean, someone like [Francis Ford] Coppola is establishing a similar institution. He wants the whole range of international films available there some day. I don't know when he'll get around to that, but that's the idea, and he keeps buying films.

CC: He buys films?

JL: And buying good copies, too.

RC: Is he competing, that you know of, with the Museum?

JL: No, there's no competition.

CC: In other words, things like distributing *Napoleon*, for instance, and having it—

JL: I think that grew out of his interest in a great many kinds of films and a great many different times of film history. It's only a century.

RC: That's right.

CC: Yes, it's not a long—that's what's most interesting. There are many people who were around when—

JL: But there's a commercial reason, I think, for the breeding of laughter. Everyone who makes films wants to sell his new film, really wants to destroy, spiritually or in some way, what has happened last year. So that companies would do everything possible to withdraw films of any past, even one year. You had a hard time seeing a film a year old. 42nd Street was almost the only place that you could do that. This was in the thirties.

CC: I'm reading your article on *Little Caesar* here; it's very good; quoting Dwight McDonald.

RC: How does the film community now view the Museum? Is there just one opinion, that it's fine, that it's doing a good job in film, that it should be doing more?

JL: As an ornament.

RC: As an ornament. Because they're not doing a pretty good job of—?

JL: No. They're proud of the ornament. And they sometimes do favors there and get favors done for them.

- RC: But who would you say, then, is doing the work that the Museum once did?
- JL: As soon as [John Hay] Whitney got into the film business, the Museum grew very attentive to everything that Whitney did in films, including the [David O.] Selznick productions and others.
- CC: You think it's all part of the scheme for Mary Lea Bandy and the people there now, for instance, to be openly welcoming associations with the major Hollywood film companies, and also they do get materials from them? That's all part of the—
- JL: Well sure, and that's not bad. I can think of much worse ways to run a film museum.
- CC: That's true, it could be adversarial.
- JL: There have been terrible film museums. You can quote me on that.
- CC: To give some perspective, though, to what the Museum achieved, lots of people say it was almost as shocking really to have a museum of that sort at the time as was the art. The art was very shocking at the time, in the late twenties.
- JL: All of the pictures that were being hung were not full accepted.
- CC: If you compare, though, The Museum of Modern Art—
- JL: That first [exhibition], which sounds like, sort of basic principles of picture hanging, that was an adventure for everyone.
- CC: What about other places, though, for instance, in Moscow or Paris or Berlin in the late twenties in 1930, '31, when you went over, were there institutions that were at all comparable to the Museum at that time? Were there other people doing things that were similar to the Modern, or was the Modern very much a trendsetter?
- JL: There was the Bauhaus. And I think the Bauhaus was one of the things that pushed The Museum of Modern Art into being, too. But there weren't many places like that.
- CC: What was the climate like when you arrived in the Soviet Union? Were things beginning to clamp down a bit more, or were they still quite open? Because as I

read Alfred Barr's notes from his trip, I did see some of it. He said that even as he was there, when he met with Diego Rivera and other people in Moscow when he arrived, he said that even at that time the government was beginning to be a little more cautious as to what was shown.

JL: '27, that was the tenth anniversary, and whatever policies had been set in motion in the twenties were showing themselves very conspicuously when he was there.

CC: And what about when you were there, the climate when you arrived?

JL: A little worse.

CC: You still could meet with filmmakers, obviously, and directors.

JL: Sure, and artists, too.

CC: But were they having to be a bit more strict in what they were doing?

JL: Certainly more strict in exhibition.

CC: What about in selection of subject matter or—?

JL: This is exhibition of films, or paintings?

CC: Well, let's say films, first, in terms of films that were beginning to be—

JL: In Moscow, the only place where you could see old films, besides the school, was at The Museum of the Revolution that had its own little theater and showed films of the past. Now, there is a more sensible place where you can see old films. It's called Povtory[?]¹—replayed, the replayed cinema.

CC: Like the repertory cinema.

JL: And it's quite good, and the manager is quite good. Even when films get into trouble, he continues to show them until he's told not to. Well, the worst kind of censorship is self-censorship; it's the most prevailing one, the most insidious one. And someone like the manager of the Povtory theater just deserves a medal, I think.

CC: So when you returned here, in a sense, you were being falsely accused of being a propagandizer when really simply you were an archivist or a popularizer, trying to make known these things.

JL: Popularizing was the job of the Museum, of the whole Museum, not just the Film Library.

CC: That's what you were doing. But then when people got wind of—since they didn't agree with what you—

JL: No, this wind was artificially—

CC: Started?

JL: Used.

RC: So do you think that it was really then that the Board had to assert itself and this was just like, the straw that broke the camel's back, or was something that they could—?

CC: Probably just it terrorized them, really, to hear that. That's probably what happened.

JL: Well, maybe they thought things were getting out of hand. [Laughter]

RC: And they needed to assert their control.

JL: Let's have a little more discipline around here. [Laughter]

CC: I could see how they could—

JL: It might have been the beginning of the slide down to—because there was a slide down.

CC: So you felt your four years there—

RC: When you say a slide down, you mean a slide to not being as open, innovative adventuresome? So you would mark that—

JL: And the institution.

RC: And the beginning of an institution, at the same time.

JL: It's a contradictory situation. I'm sure that Alfred wanted an institution. He wanted the stability of an institution. But other things come along with institutions. Like carbon paper.

RC: Too much paper, and a much larger, at this point, financial board than there are curatorial staff.

JL: Oh yes. And then, every time the money grew sticky, such as now; they're having a hard time.

RC: And what about—speaking of money, at the time, was your salary terribly small and low, but you wouldn't have done anything other or was the job—?

JL: I don't remember what I got, but it was quite sufficient.

RC: It was quite sufficient at the time.

JL: Yes.

RC: Oh that's good. But let's say if it wasn't—

JL: My wife and I were able to live on it.

RC: Well that sounds okay, I guess. But was this kind of a dream job for you to be able to work with Iris? Was it something that—?

JL: Yes, it seemed a dream job, at first. Yes.

RC: And then before the resignation—

JL: You know, you could do everything you liked doing, and get a salary for it.

RC: And did you feel a sense of mission while you were doing it? We've talked to people who were around when it was just starting out, and everybody was like: We're off and we're going to make something new, and make people appreciate it. Did you sense that?

JL: Yes. Those notes [*Film Notes*] represent that tone.

CC: I think they do. I think that in a way, they seem to be—I've seen notes of [*The Last Laugh*] and—

JL: Well, we were very proud of these notes. Iris would give me hers to worry with; I would give her mine to worry with. Oh, there was a fatal note. There was. That last straw is in there. It's the note for Dovzhenko's film, *Arsenal*.

RC: Oh my. When you describe the atmosphere as being—were you out of hand? We've heard people saying all the shows were mounted at the last minute, and the public would be entering, and it was a kind of spirit of, let's get it doing so much and running up to deadlines and all that. Was it chaotic?

JL: Oh, there was a lot of pleasant panic, I'm sure. Especially in hanging a show.

RC: How about in your area?

JL: Not much. We could take our time.

RC: Pretty much in control, yes. I like the way you described kind of a beginning, or rather an end to the first phase.

CC: The whole business about being a film poem, and all. This is, "*Arsenal* is entirely a political film," and your quotes of Dovzhenko and all.

JL: That was the one note that irritated people most.

RC: Well the strange thing is, do you think that the actual trustees even saw this, even saw your films or your note, but it was just brought to their attention by this agitator writer?

JL: I think it was agitation, yes.

CC: I could see this sort of thing getting people excited. [Reading a quote by Dovzhenko from Leyda's *Film Notes for Arsenal*] "Madame I am not thinking—I'm excited." [quote from Gustave Courbet on his paintings] This excitement which like a red thread runs through all my films."

JL: In fact [Gustave] Courbet said it.

CC: Yes.

JL: It didn't help it at all. [Laughing]

CC: [Reading] "I have preserved [this excitement] to this day, eternally kindled by the indomitable rise of the revolution."

JL: This is a job I had after I left the Museum, doing photographs for a magazine called *Arts Weekly*.

RC: Oh, there's Alfred.

JL: He hated that [photograph](#).

RC: [Laughing] He did? Why?

JL: Because he had a nervous breakdown the next day, and he sees the breakdown in the photograph.

RC: Was that when he took off, then, for—? He went to Europe and was working there for a year? Or was that just one of the first? He had some—

JL: No. There were European trips quite regularly. Have you spoken to Mrs. Barr?

CC: Yes.

RC: Yes.

JL: So, this was a new, tiny magazine called *Arts Weekly*, and it was either Ralph Steiner, with whom I had been working, or Lincoln Kirstein, who was doing a regular piece for it, who decided they needed a photograph in every issue of a dealer or an artist or a collector.

CC: And you took that picture?

JL: Yes, I did the regular. And that, of course, naturally melted into *Vanity Fair* and places like that.

RC: So did you have contact with Frank Crowninshield then?

JL: No. I don't think you fully understand the strata in the place.

CC: I think I begin to, because even—

RC: No, it's interesting for you—I do, and yet, at the beginning it's been presented in what we've read and this and that as oh, everybody was working together.

CC: No, I can see how even if it was supposedly a clubby atmosphere—I mean, Mrs. Rockefeller—it would be just like if you have a small gallery downtown.

JL: Or a salon.

RC: Or a salon; that's right.

CC: I mean, Mrs. Rockefeller and her group, they would be together, and they would of course speak to Alfred Barr and a few of the others, but it's not to say that she

would be out having lunches and spending afternoons talking to the staff. It just wouldn't happen. You're there for one particular scholarly reason, and they're there for god knows what, more of a social reason. The worlds don't mesh all the time.

JL: And then there are some professions that are looked down upon. The man who does the photographs, you don't invite him to lunch.

RC: And yet at that time, how was the Photography Department doing?

JL: As usual, it was—

RC: They were instituted, it was there.

JL: And by the way, haven't you seen—?

RC: We've seen John Szarkowski. We spoke to Beaumont Newhall.

JL: Yes, but haven't you seen the printed text of the memorial meeting for Alfred?

CC: Yes, that was very excellent.

JL: Because Beaumont is very clear about how he got—and that was just the way Alfred determined things.

CC: This is a very funny picture; look at the typewriter face up there.

JL: I can't even remember her name.

CC: It says Dorothy Flightman.

RC: So overall, let me ask you the big picture question. Your feeling then about your whole experience there—is it mixed, or would you be able to—?

JL: Oh, I got a great deal out of it. [Pause]

CC: It's very nice.

JL: You can have that.

CC: Thank you very much. How would you describe—?

JL: The bibliography makes good [tape break from 0:47:19 to 0:47:25]. We all changed from pioneers to other things. And that goes for Iris, too.

CC: She must have had quite a lot of energy, though, to be rushing off to Hollywood to get all those people organized and interested in their films.

JL: Yes. And she was just the right person to make the appeal.

CC: She was very excitable and could get people very keen on it? She made them appreciate what they were doing?

JL: She was very dignified and humorous at the same time. An ideal combination for social work.

CC: And do you think she surprised them when she told them what they had was quite possibly art?

JL: There were some shocks.

CC: But they must have been flattered.

JL: Very few people collected the films they had made. Mary Pickford was one of the very few.

CC: Harold Lloyd.

JL: And Lloyd kept his, too.

CC: [Charlie] Chaplin, I mean his later—picked up his pictures.

RC: But kept—

JL: Chaplin would never help.

CC: No?

JL: No.

CC: They were always his, he felt?

JL: Yes.

CC: And to this day, isn't that true? In Switzerland he has his own archive.

JL: He's interested in money, or was interested in money while he was alive. Maybe he's still interested in money. But anything that threatened his income would just be refused by him.

CC: I would think some of the earlier—

JL: Very politely, very politely—

CC: Yes.

JL: But very surely.

CC: Well, if you think back, you know, people look at someone like John Ford, and they say what wonderful pictures he directed, and of course they think of the many sound pictures that he did which were very good, but in any of those early directors' filmographies, they may have directed 20, 30, one or two-reelers that most people never see.

JL: Oh, Ford directed an enormous number of short westerns.

CC: How many films do you think he would have directed altogether? Maybe a hundred?

JL: I don't think he's ever counted it out.

CC: It's really remarkable. And it's just like with Sternberg, he—unfortunately, there are many people out there who, as soon as you say "Sternberg" they say "[Marlene] Dietrich" and then that's all they think about and he was quite a wonderful director.

JL: The one valuable thing that Iris did in introducing films from other countries, and also films from people making films in this country who were not the darlings of the reviewers or even of the producers, was to make certain reputations that didn't exist before she decided they must be attended to. And you couldn't really resist her arguments because they would be ornamented with so many films that you remembered laughing at, like Mae West. And I think that was the beginning of Mae West being treated seriously.

RC: When you say that she decided, was there anybody else? Let's say yourself? I'm sure she valued your opinions as well.

JL: No, we all talked about things, but it was Iris making the decisions.

RC: It was really her.

JL: Yes. People would bring in things that they found in their closets. One person found, in a hatbox, actually, in a closet, the only surviving print of the only film that [Eleonora] Duse made. That was a big day.

CC: What picture was that?

JL: It's called *Cenere*, ashes. It's just wonderful.

RC: Did you have any other experiences like that, when people would bring in, they wouldn't know what they had? Do you remember?

JL: Yes, yes.

CC: What other—?

JL: The publicity was partly with that intention.

CC: Can you tell us any other discoveries?

JL: Well, discovery of people, too. There was—now I've forgotten what his name was, someone who had worked at the Edison plant. He turned out to be ideal in handling old film, because new labs wouldn't know what to do with it. He was a very valuable person.

CC: Do you think, I mean, it may be too much flattery, but answer honestly. Do you think it if wasn't for yourself, pictures such as, oh, a lot of [Sergei] Eisenstein's pictures and [Vsevolod] Pudovkin and the fact that people see them, do you think—?

JL: I can't believe that they wouldn't have gotten on all on their own.

CC: You certainly helped them along, I would say.

JL: Well, lots of [INAUDIBLE: 0:53:02].

CC: To reach an audience, though?

JL: There were two different film societies in New York before I went abroad. One was a left one called the Film Forum. That was run mostly by Sidney Howard and Tom Brandon. By the way, did you know about the [memorial meeting for Tom Brandon tonight](#)? At 6:00? In our museum?

CC: No.

JL: They're showing an extraordinary document that hasn't been seen for decades on the [Passaic Textile Strike](#) in 1926 that Tom had.

CC: It's interesting to think too because nowadays you'll go to a film class, or I started a film society when I was in college, and we would show films like Eisenstein pictures and Pudovkin and things like that, and nowadays people don't look at it as necessarily

JL: Can you imagine the time when that wasn't possible?

CC: Well, not only that, but you think to yourself, first of all, if they're not on the first bill, they're on the second bill. So that tells you about where most people think the Russian picture comes, and that it is very much the beginnings of film structure. And number two, I never really feel a great deal of leftist, or, it doesn't feel political in the overriding sense.

JL: Oh, I didn't finish my description of the two film societies that were going. They were like two poles. There was this left film society that Sidney Howard and Tom Brandon organized, showing films that we care a great deal about now—things like *Kuhle Wampe* wasn't possible then. Fritz Lang's [M.](#) was censored; it couldn't be seen.

CC: Censored? Why would that have been censored that picture?

JL: You ask the Ohio State Board of Censors.

CC: God. Oh, because of the child.

JL: That helped that corner. Then there was a much more chic film society that Julien Levy ran.

CC: The dealer?

JL: Yes.

RC: The Levy Gallery dealer; huh.

JL: And that was the first showing of [L'Age d'Or](#).

CC: Oh, so you had a surrealist faction over here, and the sort of wild Dada group, and then you had the political left. That's really very strange.

JL: And I worked for both of them. [Laughter]

RC: There you go. That's how you got into trouble.

CC: Did you work then with—? Buñuel was working at the same time as you did?

JL: Yes, well, we almost missed each other, it was that close. That Pan-American Committee was formed—it was probably part of the Cold War.

CC: How was he? Was he in the doldrums then, on the way to Mexico?

JL: He wasn't on the way to Mexico then. He didn't even think about Mexico then.

CC: He went out to Hollywood after that, didn't he?

JL: Hollywood before that, too.

CC: Yes. What did you think of him?

JL: I liked him very much.

CC: He was quite an original character. It's just that his films are so—they appear to me to be very differently made than the films that you've championed for so long. It's very interesting to know that—they're full of psychological content.

JL: Well, there's lots more than one kind of film.

CC: Yes, that's true. But the formalist design doesn't seem to be as apparent as it is in the Russian pictures. Now I'm happy to say, a lot of the Russian pictures now come here and are very worth seeing, and there doesn't seem to be a stigma to them.

JL: This department seems to end its interest in Soviet films with sound. It's very difficult to catch anyone going to the Russian mission; the Soviet mission at the UN gets screenings. I never see anyone from this department there.

CC: That's interesting. In other words, there might be now a great nostalgia and appreciation for the pictures of the twenties and early thirties, but it just stops, and as far as the fifties and sixties or seventies are concerned.

JL: Well, I think we're losing a lot. I manage to see a lot of them because I go to the film festival every other year.

CC: Aren't you gratified to know that pictures though like *Siberiade* and that kind of picture at least is being shown and popularized?

JL: Yes.

CC: I mean the Russians always seem [INAUDIBLE: 0:58:02].

JL: It would be nice if people interested in films could see them, too.

CC: Did you see that picture for instance?

JL: Yes, I saw that both in Moscow and here.

CC: I thought that was quite extraordinary. Did you see it?

RC: No.

CC: It's three hours long, but it's an epic; it's a fabulous film. It's intimate as well as being—it's very well made. And then I saw that one of their latest—once again, another Russian picture was nominated for an Academy Award, over and above.

JL: If you have any friends at *Variety*, try to find out and tell me afterwards, what [Andrei] Konchalovsky is doing in Santa Monica or Malibu.

CC: What, the director?

JL: Yes, of *Siberiade*.

CC: Really? He's there?

JL: Yes. He's been there now for more than a year. [Laughter]

CC: [INAUDIBLE: 0:58:48] pretty interesting so far.

JL: There are casual announcements once in a while.

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:58:57