

UNICA - AMATEUR CINEMA IS 100 YEARS OLD

In July 1923, the Pathé company marketed the first camera in France, which marked the beginning of amateur cinema.

This camera was put on the market a few months after the Pathé Baby projector which, at the end of 1922, was associated with the invention of a new format, the 9.5 mm, a non-flammable reversible film recognisable by its famous central perforation. It is the first amateur format and its anniversary has given rise to numerous events in France and Switzerland in the second half of 2022, and perhaps elsewhere too.

The history of the 9.5 and the Pathé company was first of all that of the birth of amateur cinema, before the "format wars" of the second half of the 20th century, when 16 mm, 8 mm and Super 8 imposed themselves on the market and led the 9.5 to become little by little "confidential", remaining the format of choice only for a few diehards. The 9.5 mm format quickly crossed the borders of France and Europe, and 9.5 mm films can be found in UNICA's archives, as this format existed before the other "small formats" and even before the creation of UNICA.



The Jérôme Seydoux - Pathé Foundation, based in Paris, proposed a special "centenary" programme with, in particular, an exhibition entitled "Pathé-Baby, le cinéma chez soi", an exceptional screening of films proposed by the Ciné-club 9,5 de France (edited films and recent films by club members) and, over two days, an international symposium entitled "From Pathé-Baby to 9.5 mm, the invention of home cinema" at the foundation and at the INHA (Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art). In addition to these French events, an international conference was held in November in Bern, Switzerland, at the Lichtspiel film library, where the films of the UNICA film library have been kept since 2013; this conference took place over three days and was entitled "9.5 mm: And Cinema is Everywhere". For the record, participants at the UNICA 2022 Congress in Locarno had the pleasure of meeting representatives of the UNICA Film Library on 25 August.

These different events have demonstrated the intensity of the research being carried out today on the birth of amateur cinema and, inseparably, on the extraordinary inventiveness and dynamism with which 9.5 mm film was developed in the four corners of the world under the impetus of the French company Pathé... before the American giant Kodak entered the scene.

A large number of young researchers are now enthusiastically examining this first era of amateur cinema - to place it in the 1920s, 30s and 40s - looking at sociological and societal aspects as well as technical and commercial ones. Testimonies have been brought from France, Great Britain, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Germany and Austria, but also from the Czech Republic, Hungary, the United States, Canada (Quebec), and even Taiwan and Japan.

If amateur cinema was initially a cinema "of solitary individuals" and if particular emphasis is placed on remarkable family collections such as those of Joliot-Curie-Langevin and Noufflard in France, Mroz in Austria, Blessing in Germany or Baldassini in Italy, the emergence of clubs and federations at the end of the 1920's and the beginning of the 1930's is also very present in the history of amateur cinema, as well as the role played by the 9.5 mm film in educational and religious circles... The images preserved from this period are all evidence of the way in which institutions presented science, culture and the world, and of the way in which filmmakers who had access to this new medium fixed their immediate world on film (family films) or their more distant world (reports, travel films). And there are still many collections to be found and discovered or rediscovered, coming from private individuals or archives, particularly diocesan ones.

During the screening of films by the Ciné Club 9,5 de France, on 14 October 2022, we were able to note that this club, created in 1966, is still very active and has succeeded in making up for the successive deficiencies of suppliers of 9.5 mm film, which enables its members to continue to shoot in this format. In addition to France and the United Kingdom, which are the countries where 9.5 is historically the most present, several European countries and Canada continue to form a 9.5 community that holds international meetings. The 50th edition will take place at the end of April 2023 in Spain, more precisely in Catalonia.

Spain was also present at the colloquium on 5 December, as the Filmoteca de Catalunya, which grew out of the Catalan excursionist centre created in 1932, presented the legacy of the pioneers of Catalan amateur cinema that we at UNICA know well. Delmiro de Caralt, one of the founders of UNICA... and of the Cinematheque de Catalunya, has left his mark on UNICA and in 2008 his name was given to the international CICT-UNESCO prize awarded each year at the UNICA congress. Another Catalan amateur filmmaker, Jan Baca, has the best record at UNICA, with 34 films and more than 10 gold medals between 1968 and 2011...

It is worth noting that the presentation mentioned the 4th International Competition and first International Congress held in Barcelona in 1935, the precursor to the official founding of UNICA in Paris in 1937, with the Catalan film "Hombre importante", a 9.5 mm film which is the oldest film kept in UNICA's film library! A magazine entitled "Cinema amateur" was launched by the Catalan excursionist centre in 1932.

During the same colloquium, UNICA was also mentioned during the presentation of the birth of amateur cinema in Hungary, a country that joined our organisation in 1937. And then we went far afield, to Taiwan and Japan, countries that were not very present on UNICA's screens...

As for the Swiss conference in Bern in mid-November 2022, it brought many testimonies from the United Kingdom, the United States, Quebec, Austria and the Czech Republic, as well as a documentary by our president Rolf Leuenberger on the entrails of a 1922 Pathé Baby projector from his collection at the Ciné Muséo 65 in Sessa... a museum that participants in the excursion on 27 August during UNICA in Locarno had the pleasure of discovering!



Amateur cinema is thus 100 years old and with the Pathé Baby were born the ancestors of the Smartphone allowing shots to be taken and of the Home-cinema allowing the projection of... Cinema at home!

Of course, these few lines have only skimmed the content of particularly rich days and I invite you to visit the websites of the events if you wish to know more...

Long live amateur cinema! and long live UNICA!

Serge MICHEL