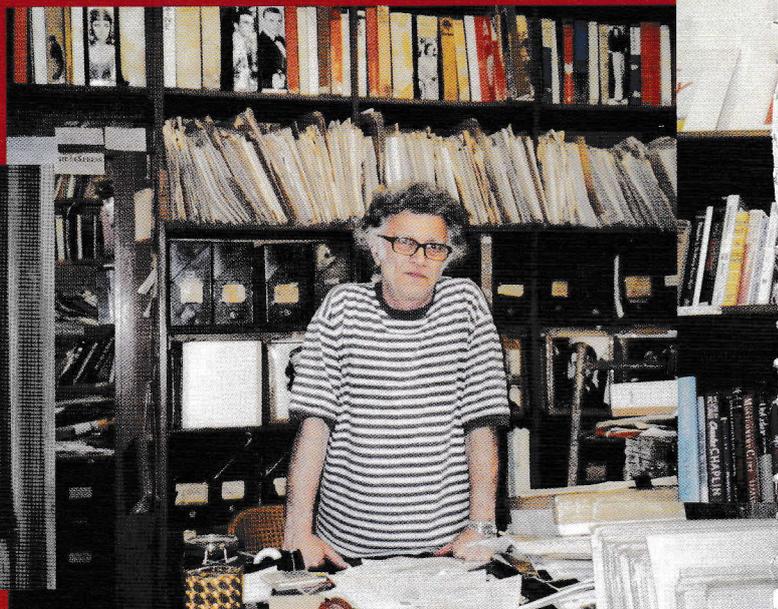
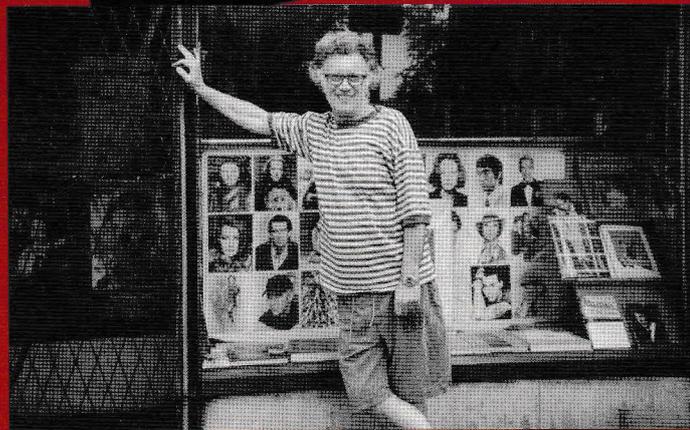
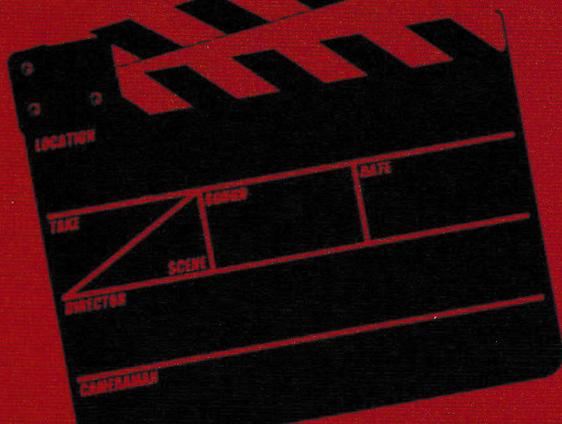


The Final Frame

After 30 years Fred Zentner is selling the Cinema Bookshop in Bloomsbury. He tells **Sara Waterson** why it's time to move on



At a Picture Research Association function last month I mentioned to a few fellow veterans of the profession that Fred Zentner, legendary founder of the Cinema Bookshop in London's Bloomsbury, will be pulling the iron grille across his doorway for the final time at the end of July. "That really is the end of an era" was the universal chorus.

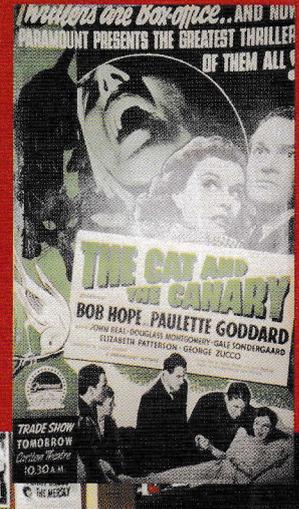
The Cinema Bookshop, with its hidden treasures and expert advice, has never advertised nor bothered with a catalogue, yet had always been a first port of call for any original research into film in the days before we were chained to our computers. Every dusty corner of the shop was filled with stills, posters, scripts, ephemera, and of course books; and if Fred didn't have what you needed he would know where to find it. Now the computer revolution, which has made the researcher's life so easy, but so dull – if not redundant – has finished off Fred's business too.

I first ventured into his famously scruffy headquarters over

30 years ago, but Fred was always busy talking to someone, either in the shop or on the phone, or shouting down into the mysterious basement where generations of young aficionados of the movies toiled in the gloom, filing endless boxes of film stills. So it wasn't until I had a project in the mid eighties for which I could enlist his help that we became friends.

I needed some stills from obscure German films of the '30s and '40s for a book on the German Home Front during the war, for Calmann & King, whose offices were down the road. A visit to the depths of the basement was in order for such rarities. I took to calling into the shop on my way down to the tube of an evening, and we'd have a drink sometimes at the Kenilworth Hotel as Fred has never been one for pubs.

A year or two later a mysterious go-between commissioned me to find James Bond first editions and memorabilia to decorate Goldeneye, the house in Jamaica which had belonged to Ian Fleming, where he wrote the Bond novels. It had passed into the hands of Chris Blackwell, founder of reggae label Island Records. A good deal of Bond stuff was



“Books don’t sell now. It’s stuff they want, paper stuff, that’s where the money is.”

Fred Zentner at his Bloomsbury bookshop which is to close at the end of July (left)

bought from Fred: books, drawings, posters, stills, original scripts, and artwork and cinema advertising props for the films. I think he’d even once had Oddjob’s bowler hat. The agent gave me the funds in wads of cash, in suitably Cold War fashion. After I spent the last lot, he vanished never to be seen again, and I was stuck with my swag. “There’s something odd about James Bond stuff,” mused Zentner. “I’ve got the original set designs for *Casino Royale*, huge bird’s eye drawings, quite amazing – I wish I’d had them in those days to sell to you. Now I’m in the same situation! I sold them once to a customer, who gave them back to me years ago, to sell on for him. Now he’s disappeared, and I can’t find him.”

I’d called by to ask him about a long out-of-print book, *La Jetée* which was made into a cult film by Chris Marker in 1962. It was set mainly at Orly airport near Paris and made from black and white stills. I’d seen the film by chance on cable and noticed that an old friend, graphic designer Germano Facetti appeared in it. Copies of the book are reputed to sell for hundreds of pounds. Fred knew about the

film of course, and had once kept the book – ‘more of a pamphlet’. “I had several once, couldn’t get rid of them. I sold the last years ago for a few quid.”

Fred Zentner was born 70 years ago in a small village in the Sudetenland, an area of border land that was fiercely contested by the Germans and Czechs during World War II. His father and uncle fled the Nazis in 1939, bringing Fred and his brother to England. No one else in the family managed to get out. “It was a very large family, but I never knew them, so I don’t like to harp on it.” Does he feel English now? “I did until I went to Germany! I’ve just been.” Fred’s back has been playing up, and his doctor sent him to a specialist in Düsseldorf. “It’s the food, the smells, what you had for breakfast as a kid. It takes you right back to your roots.”

Whilst the cinema was perhaps a necessary escape from a dislocated wartime childhood, Fred’s positive outlook, international perspective, and sheer charm all stood him in good stead in his chosen profession. He began collecting film books when he was sixteen, a habit which took serious hold in

his twenties. Apart from going most days to the cinema, he wasn't a great gadabout: "I sometimes went to a club in Mayfair called La Côte d'Azur. But I don't really drink, never did. And what's the point of dancing if you can't dance like Fred Astaire?"

Cinema literature became his passion. "Saturday was book-scouting day, full stop. Always down the Charing Cross Road". Although he had the chance to 'get into film', through a friend who was involved in the business on the costing side, he felt it was "all pie in the sky. And then I knew enough about it, I knew I couldn't handle all the back-stabbing and other nonsense". Instead, Fred turned his interest into a serious business, dealing at first from home. Even in the early days he'd obtain essential American publications from the renowned Larry Edmunds in Hollywood: "To a kid collector, his shop was Mecca. But in post-war England we couldn't afford those prices. So I said to him, how about I send you three books for your one? And we began dealing together like that."

In the late '60s he took a couple of shelves in a friend's shop, and the books sold so well that in 1969 he opened the shop in Great Russell Street. It looks exactly the same, with its Dickens blue plaque, blue art deco logo board, and window full of curling stills of erstwhile vamps and long dead hearthrobs.

Why has the trade now died? "I was only particularly interested in the collectors' market, but that market has changed phenomenally," he explained. "You were selling a

He does show me a couple of his many signed first editions, which are kept in his inner sanctum, the miniscule back room (which houses the shop's only chair). *Benia Krik, a Film-Novel* by Isaac Babel, copy one of the first ever English language edition of 500, is the text of the screenplay, unfilmed at the time of publication. Fred is asking £950 for this paperback in pictorial covers with a striking typographic design by Lloyd, translated by Ivor Montagu and SS Nolando and published in 1935 by Collet's. He also has a signed first edition of *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* dedicated by the author to Joan Morgan and also with a drawing by Warhol on the titlepage of a Campbell's soup can. Published by Harcourt Brace in 1975, this copy is in fine condition and is priced at £1,250.

You could also pick treasures at random from the shelves which cover the walls of the shop, spotting the rarer books which were carefully wrapped in cellophane covers. I found on the Russia shelf Serge Eisenstein, a first French edition of *Reflexions d'un Cinéaste* published by Editions en Langues Etrangères, Moscow 1958, selling for £95 in original dust jacket. In near good condition it has many stills and photos, and a whole section of Eisenstein's own working designs and drawings.

It's rumoured that Fred has at least as much stock at home, and I know he has a warehouse in Watford, which is where the shop contents will be stored from next month whilst he ponders what to do with it all. He could pay someone to deal

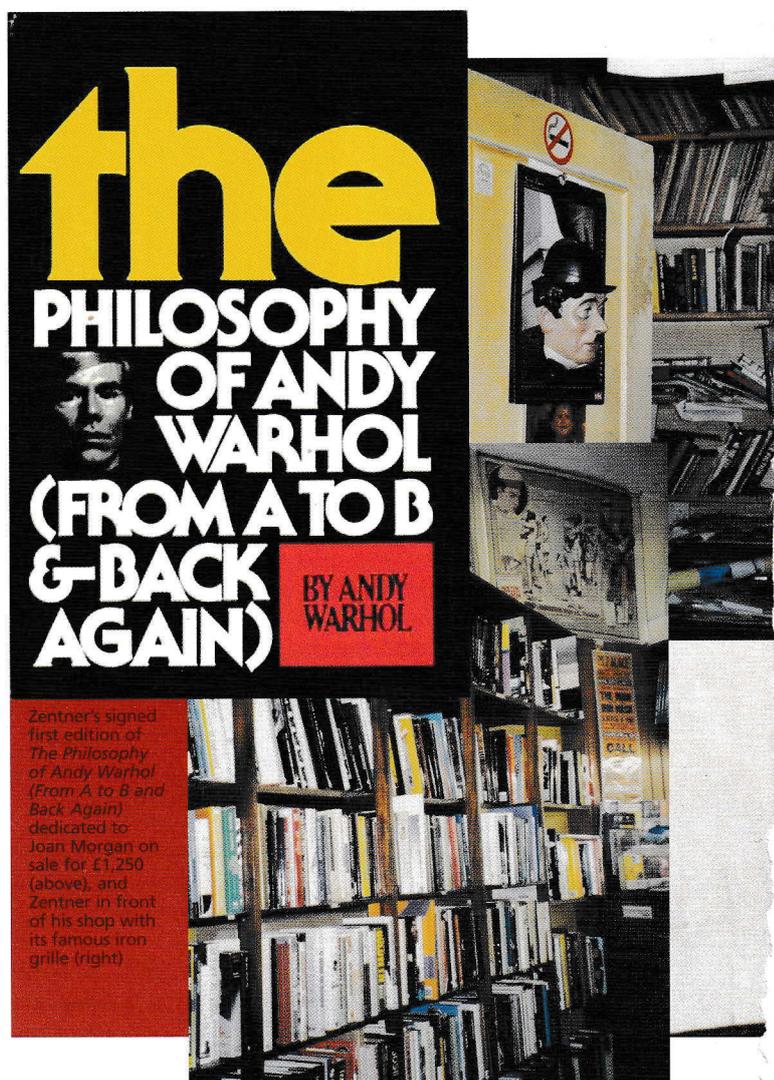
Halliwell's *Film and Video Guide* had its genesis in Zentner's collection

kind of fantasy – mine was the '40s, which I suppose I could just about remember. The collectors' thing is based on nostalgia. Back then they were interested in silent films, but there are very few now who are. Today's model is Brad Pitt, but when I started, it was James Dean. The big female star was Jean Harlow, then it moved on to Monroe. Now it changes very quickly, but predictably."

From early on, the business became a magnet for serious film buffs. Leslie Halliwell's definitive *Film and Video Guide* had its genesis in Zentner's collection of New York Times film reviews dating from 1913. The shop's client base was varied: artists might want reference for a movie-inspired painting; academics from the nearby British Museum used his encyclopaedic stills collection to provide a shot from every film of the *Queen of Sheba* for a recent exhibition; the BBC has been a regular customer; even advertising whiz kids from Soho called by for inspiration.

I asked what changes he's seen in the type of customer who uses the shop. "Quite radical in a sense", he replied. "When I started I shouldn't think there were two schools in the country which had a course on film, and now there are dozens." So academia has provided a host of new customers? "Yes, but they aren't collectors. They want the latest study on a director or actor. I haven't ordered any new books in a while, there's no point now I'm closing. It's not what I want to do."

In his time Zentner bagged some renowned collections, including those of the late Dilys Powell and Peter Noble. His hoards of film magazines, 'press books', scripts, cinema programmes and other ephemera still fill those holy of holies, the back room and the basement. "Books don't sell now" he opines. "It's stuff they want, paper stuff, that's where the money is."



Zentner's signed first edition of *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* dedicated to Joan Morgan on sale for £1,250 (above), and Zentner in front of his shop with its famous iron grille (right)



Fred Zentner's Top 10 Cinema Books*

it on eBay, but seems bored to death by the very thought. It would be too impersonal: one gets a strong sense that the greatest pleasure of Zentner's working life has been yarning with the browsers who drift into the shop; some serious buyers, some idle passers by, and some famous stars curious to see what's on offer about themselves.

"James Mason spent a whole afternoon here once, looking at all his stuff. He enjoyed that; David Lean came in one day – the Master – and looked around for quite a while. He wanted Charles Laughton's biography. I held out my hand to him as he left but he walked out straight past me. His wife – it was the last but one, the blonde – must have given him a telling off, because he rushed back a minute later with his hand stuck out, so we shook.

He continued: "It was funny, only a week or two ago a very tall handsome girl came in, and I was sure I knew her but I couldn't quite place her. She asked for *Sparks Fly Upwards* and then of course it clicked – her dad's double. It was Stewart Grainger standing there!"

There's a different sort of browser in the shop these days, it seems. "They mostly come in for information. They take it down, from me or off the shelves, then go off to find a better deal on the net." This led on to the question of why Fred has refused to embrace the technological possibilities of bookselling on the web. Basic lighting and a credit card reader are the only concessions to modernity, and the shop remains a Health and Safety inspector's nightmare. When a regular asked a few years back if he was getting a computer, he riposted derisively "Not until we get the electrics."

As well as trying to keeping up with the latest technological developments, what other problems confront the small bookseller these days? There's no longer any future for a themed bookshop such as his in central London he says.

1 King Cohn: the life and times of Harry Cohn

Author **Bob Thomas**
Publisher **G P Putnam's Sons (1967)**

2 Good Night, Sweet Prince: The Life and Times of John Barrymore

Author **Gene Fowler**
Publisher **Blakiston (1945)**

3 Elia Kazan: A Life

Author **Elia Kazan**
Publisher **Alfred A. Knopf (1988)**

4 The International Film Encyclopedia

Author **Ephraim Katz (editor)**
Publisher **Macmillan (1979)**

5 The Hollywood Musical

Author **Clive Hirschhorn**
Publisher **Crown (1981)**

6 My Last Breath

Author **Luis Buñuel**
Publisher **Jonathan Cape (1984)**

7 The Parade's Gone By

Author **Kevin Brownlow**
Publisher **Alfred A. Knopf (1968)**

8 The Story of Cinema

Author **David Shipman**
Publisher **Hodder & Stoughton (1982)**

9 Jean Renoir – My Life and my Films

Author **Jean Renoir**
Publisher **Collins (1974)**

10 This is Orson Welles

Author **Orson Welles, Peter Bogdonovich**
Publisher **HarperCollins (1992)**

*In no particular order

"Forget it. Rents are too high. There's no speciality that hasn't been catered for already. And everybody buys online nowadays anyway. I understand why. I can see the wonders of the web, I wouldn't knock it. But it's not for me. I should have sold up five years ago. I'm Methuselah! It's time to stop."

When you look around the shop, with its tin box files, old brown folders curling at the corners, and the spike beside the till which is his only filing system; and weigh these against Fred's relish of the human intercourse which is so obviously his chief pleasure in his calling, you can see why he wasn't disposed to adapt. Computers are not the Zentner idea of fun, and he doesn't care to compete on those terms.

He's philosophical about attempts to cash in on his renown. I asked him what connection he has with the Cinema Bookshop in Hay-on-Wye, so prominent in web searches for the name. "None", he said emphatically, albeit with a wry smile. "They were once a cinema so I suppose it's understandable." I mention another shop nearby with a similar name and logo, but he chooses to take the view that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

How can people get hold of him once the shop has closed; after all he's still got all those stills (about a quarter of a million, he thinks), a few thousand posters, and a basement full of film memorabilia. How many books remain? "I've no idea! I've never counted them." I try a different tack: "How many of the books remaining are collectors' items?" He estimates around 10% of the stock, observing whilst rummaging in his pile of paperwork on the desk, that there aren't that many rare books on the cinema: "It's too new, and anyway rare and demand are two different things."

He says he has a website, and hands over a piece of paper on which is written info@cinemabookshop.net. "That's not a website, it's an email address" I tell him gently. "Oh is it."

Any regrets about not getting to grips with the technology that would enable him to carry on dealing from home? Or does he want to stop to get a life? "No!" he explodes, to the latter question. "No regrets. It's been a very good life. It's taken me from a council house to a five bedroom house in Hampstead, just by playing shopkeepers. It's a labour of love, which it always has been, it was very successful." ☺

