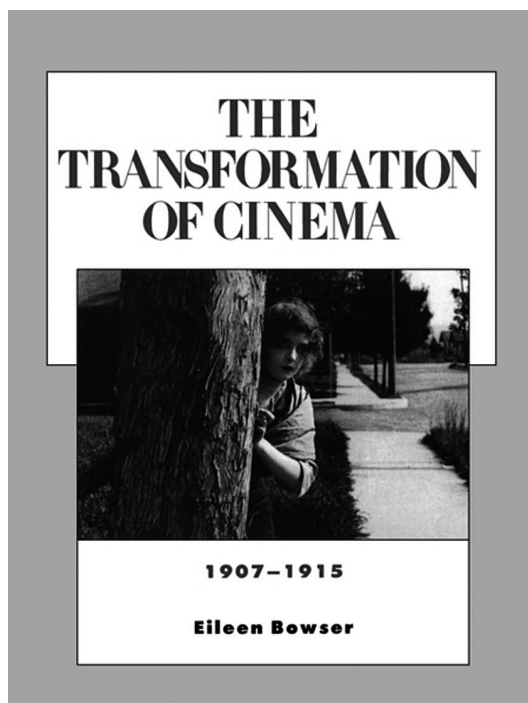


Eileen Bowser (1928-2019)

Jon Gartenberg

Jon Gartenberg was formerly a Curator in the Film Department of The Museum of Modern Art in New York, and a member of FIAF's Cataloguing Commission from 1982-1991.





Cover of Eileen Bowser's book *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915*.

Eileen Bowser, noted archivist and film historian, passed away on Christmas Eve of 2019. A major presence in FIAF, Eileen began her career at MoMA (the Museum of Modern Art) in 1953, moving to the Department of Film as a secretary to then-curator Richard Griffith in 1954. She worked her way up to Associate Curator in 1967, to full Curator in 1976, and retired from the Museum in 1993. For almost two decades, she headed the archival activities of the department, including acquisition, cataloguing, preservation, archival loans, and research (including the Film Study Center and the Film Stills Archive), and also curated major exhibitions of films from the archive.

Eileen worked in autonomous fashion, separate from the Programming section of the Department (headed at that time by Adrienne Mancina) and the Circulating Film Library (led first by Margareta Akermark, and subsequently by William Sloan). This was the practice before the era of consolidation of archives within a top-down structure imposed by their larger institutional organizations.

I began working for Eileen as her assistant in 1973, collaborating with her on a curatorial level in the ensuing years until my departure from

MoMA in 1991, and therefore had an up-close and personal working relationship with her over the second half of her illustrious career there. Eileen was a profound mentor to me, as well as to others within the film department, including Ron Magliozzi, Madeline Matz, Emily Sieger, Cathy Surowiec, and Peter Williamson. She also exerted an outsized influence on innumerable professional colleagues – fellow archivists and especially researchers and scholars – whom she guided in their work.

Eileen possessed an incredibly strong work ethic. She kept regular 9:30 to 5:30 hours at MoMA, only taking a break at 1:00 p.m. for her lunch which she most often ate in her office. She had a stack of papers in her in-box, and I would see her reply to correspondence, day after day, in systematic fashion, starting at the top of the pile and working down to the bottom, moving items from in-box to out-box. She functioned in her work like a well-oiled machine, whether dealing with MoMA-related issues, FIAF contacts, research queries, or any other matter. She was a model of workmanship to behold and emulate. She was also very ethical: she once described her work as being “a moral right and ethical responsibility – to keep films from disappearing.”

Eileen was reserved, completely professional, and focused on her work. She deflected gamesmanship and rarely gossiped or shared her personal opinions about colleagues. This inspired others to set aside their differences and focus on the projects at hand. Nonetheless, she exuded a quiet warmth to those whom she trusted well.

Eileen's professional career at MoMA was replete with noteworthy achievements. In addition to overseeing the work of the entire archive staff, she also accomplished significant milestones in her own right, particularly in the area of her pioneering and original scholarship. She was an assiduous researcher. She authored a monograph on Carl Dreyer,¹ and

1. Eileen Bowser, *The Films of Carl Dreyer*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964.

supplemented Iris Barry's original *Film Notes*.² With Richard Griffith, she researched material for the revised edition of his picture book (with Arthur Mayer) on *The Movies*,³ and added an update to its 1981 edition.⁴

She also worked with Griffith on a D. W. Griffith retrospective in 1964, for which she revised Iris Barry's 1940 publication (which had accompanied the first Griffith retrospective) *D. W. Griffith, American Film Master*, and contributed an extensive, annotated filmography.⁵ Eileen wrote an introduction to the publication of the *Biograph Bulletins, 1908-1912*,⁶ and, in 1975, curated a further retrospective of Griffith's work. For this show, many never-before-seen Biograph films directed by Griffith between 1908 and 1913 were printed up from the original negatives, and the extraordinary visual quality of these new copies enhanced the filmmaker's reputation as the first great modern artist of cinema. In addition, Eileen engaged young cinema scholars Tom Gunning and Ron Mottram to write program notes about the films, and single-handedly catalogued the D. W. Griffith papers held at the Museum in order to provide access to these significant source documents for scholarly research. Screening Griffith's feature film oeuvre allowed for a reassessment of his final work *The Struggle* (1931) as a kind of return to the conceits of his Biograph-era productions.

For the Brighton Project, Eileen hosted, at MoMA, a group of archivists and researchers who gathered over five days in November 1977 and two in January 1978 to screen American fiction films produced between 1900 and 1906. Paul Spehr (whose death we mark elsewhere in this issue) printed up 16mm copies of films of the period in the Library of Congress collection, while the George Eastman House (Museum) and MoMA contributed additional

2. Eileen Bowser, ed., *Film Notes*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970. These essays, originally published in 1935 and again in 1949, were written by Iris Barry, Richard Griffith, Arthur Knight, Gary Carey, and Alistair Cooke. Eileen contributed her own writing to the 1970 volume.

3. Richard Griffith and Arthur Mayer, *The Movies*. Revised edition, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970. First published in 1957.

4. New York: Columbus Books, 1981.

5. Iris Barry, with an annotated list of films by Eileen Bowser, *D. W. Griffith., American Film Master*. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1965. Original version 1940.

6. *Biograph Bulletins 1908-1912*. New York: Octagon Books, 1973.



MoMA's D. W. Griffith Exhibition in 1975.

titles. Scholars discussed the films in marathon screening sessions and decided which ones which they would write about. For the ensuing FIAF publication *Cinema 1900-1906*, Eileen wrote the lead article entitled, "Preparation for Brighton – The American Contribution."⁷ In her essay, she pointed to significant aspects of this early cinema work: the context in which the films were originally shown, the genres represented in early cinema (e.g., trick and explosion films, comedies, chase films, dramas, and so on), as well as the cinematic techniques that they employed (including close-views, split-screen, and multi-shot editing). As an outgrowth of her work in early cinema, Eileen was also active in Domitor, the international organization of scholars of early cinema, a collaboration that continued past her retirement. In further educational activities, she hosted the Columbia University Seminars at MoMA, in which (primarily) New-York-area scholars presented their papers on various cinema topics.

7. Eileen Bowser, "Preparation for Brighton – The American Contribution", in Roger Holman, comp., *Cinema 1900-1906: An Analytical Study by the National Film Archive (London) and the International Federation of Film Archives*. [Volume 1]. Brussels: FIAF, 1982, pp.3-29.



FIAF Documentation Commission meeting Amsterdam, February 1974. From left to right: Brenda Davies, Michael Moulds, Karen Jones, Eileen Bowser, and John Lujckx.

One thing that Eileen brought to her work was a profound understanding of the role of the representation of time and space in cinema, and she was able to combine insights about cinematic techniques into larger narrative strategies. This was perhaps best exemplified by “The Telephone Thriller; or, The Terrors of Modern Technology”, illustrating the development of cross-cutting techniques in which one protagonist speaks to another who is in a different physical and cinematic space. She first presented this research as her Ernest Lindgren Memorial Lecture in London in 1995 and revised it for the 2008 Jonathan Dennis Memorial Lecture at the Pordenone Silent Film Festival which she attended regularly, following her retirement.

Given that the Department of Film was always considered MoMA’s stepchild, Eileen was able to bring forth the relationship of film history to larger modern art concerns – French Impressionism, German Expressionism, and other artistic movements – an endeavor to which she was well suited, having studied art history in college. For a museum-wide show on Art of the Twenties, Eileen launched a series of films with Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* (1919), writing that:

The audiences at the premiere of Broken Blossoms were overwhelmed by this new kind of film. D. W. Griffith was best known at this time for his spectacles ... films that spread over a large canvas. Broken Blossoms is a small-scale, studio-made film, a gentle fairy tale of nonresistance to violence. It broke new ground with its intimate acting style, its intensity and psychological force, and its soft-focus lighting and romantic style of photography.

In the mid-1980s, Eileen took a one-year sabbatical to research for a book on *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915*, for the “History of the American Cinema” series edited by Charles Harpole.⁸ For this, she came to MoMA virtually every day, reading through the *Moving Picture World* and other publications to chronicle the history of the American film business from the days of storefront nickelodeons to the premiere of Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*. She facilitated the purchase of Iris

8. Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915*. History of the American Cinema series. Oakland: University of California press, 1994.

Barry's papers for MoMA's archive, a resource much used later by Robert Sitton for his biography *Lady in the Dark*.⁹

Eileen was heavily committed to FIAF and a major presence in the organization over many decades, attending her first Congress, in London, in 1968, and presenting "Notes on Eisenstein's essay 'Dickens, Griffith and the Film Today'" at the 1973 Moscow Congress. She was a member of FIAF's Documentation Commission from its creation in 1969 and its first head between 1972 and 1981. She actively promoted the P.I.P., the Periodicals Indexing Project, and its *International Index to Film Periodicals*, even finding ways to garner financial subventions when it became difficult for FIAF's budget to support the project. A pioneer of the generation that began the task of professionalizing archival practices – and setting the highest standards for them – she volunteered for various FIAF initiatives including co-editing *A Handbook for Film Archives*, which covered all aspects of archival activity from "Acquisition and selection" through "Preservation" and "The Documentation Department", to "Copyright" and "Practical work".¹⁰ She hosted the 1985 Congress at MoMA, and chaired the symposium session on Slapstick Comedy, editing the ensuing publication (a compilation of the individual contributors' presentations), writing the introduction, and contributing her own article, "Subverting the Conventions: Slapstick as Genre."

Eileen served on FIAF's Executive Committee from 1968 to 1991, including a period as Vice President from 1977-1985. For me, what was most noteworthy about her tenure (which occurred during the height of the Cold War, and which I was fortunate to observe when I also attended the Congresses), was that Eileen and Wolfgang Klaue (former head of the Staatliches Filmarchiv of the German Democratic Republic) were both active in elevating FIAF's standards to an important professional level: while she was head of the Documentation Commission, he served as the

head of the FIAF Cataloguing Commission. When Eileen and Wolfgang both received the most votes during FIAF Executive Committee elections, this was not so much to provide a balance between East and West as it was a tribute by their archive colleagues to their unstinting efforts to promote the work of FIAF on a global basis.

Eileen was a member of the Editorial Board of the *FIAF Bulletin/Journal of Film Preservation* from its initial days in the early 1970s to her death nearly 50 years later. She was elected a FIAF Honorary Member on 31 May 1993 during the last FIAF Congress she ever attended, in Montevideo. Since 1968, she had only missed one (Lisbon, 1989) – because she broke her arm on her way to the airport.

For additional information on Eileen Bowser's life and career, see "Eileen Bowser – A Life Between Film History, MoMA and FIAF", an interview by Christian Dimitriu, *Journal of Film Preservation*, No.81, 11/2009, pp.25-46.

9. Robert Sitton, *Lady in the Dark. Iris Barry and the Art of Film*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

10. Eileen Bowser and John Kuiper, eds., *A Handbook for Film Archives. Based on the Experiences of Members of the International Federation of Film Archives*. Brussels: FIAF, 1980.