

IRIS BARRY: AMERICAN FILM ARCHIVE PIONEER

BRUCE HENSON

SCHOOL OF INFORMATION AND LIBRARY SCIENCE
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

Since their creation in the early 1890s, motion pictures have emerged as one of the great art forms of the Twentieth Century. Today, a public awareness exists in America of the necessity of preserving the history of film. Until the mid 1930s, however, film was not acknowledged as an art form and was considered expendable after its commercial value was exhausted, a situation that resulted in the irrevocable loss of many films and enormous gaps in America's film heritage. Iris Barry's legacy to American film archives is pervasive in that she was able to remedy the failure of film producers, government, and the public to recognize the significance of preserving motion pictures, and to elevate film to the status of art, thus ensuring that film is available for study in perpetuity. Curator Barry made a comprehensive study of film possible, for the first time in the medium's history, at the Museum of Modern Art's (MOMA) Film Library, which opened in 1935. At MOMA, Barry established the foundations of an American field that would grow tremendously, creating industry-wide standards and practices for collecting and providing access to film.

Motion pictures have emerged as one of the great art forms of the Twentieth Century. Although a public awareness exists today of the necessity of preserving the history of film, for the first 40 years of the medium's history, film was not acknowledged as an art form and was considered expendable, a situation that resulted in the irrevocable loss of many films and enormous gaps in America's film heritage. It is estimated that 75% of all silent films and 50% of all sound films made before 1950 are lost (Slide, 1992, p. 5). Contemporary American film archives consist of organized collections and repositories of films and film materials, and exist as stand

alone institutions, large organizations, or government agencies, striving to make their "collections available for viewing, whether for scholarly, artistic or generally cultural purposes" (Bowser & Kuiper, 1980, p. 13). In order to achieve this goal, archives collect, catalog, preserve, and renovate their films.

In terms of comprehensive film collection and exhibition in the United States, the privately funded film archive established at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City in 1935, has served as the model for all future archives. The pioneer of the American Film Archive field is Iris Barry, the first curator of MOMA's Film Library. Barry established standards and practices which were eventually adopted by the film industry for collecting and providing access to film in a manner that "gained recognition for the cinema as the major new art form of this century" (MOMA, 1984, p. 527). By acknowledging film as an art and by halting the widespread destruction of films, Barry made a comprehensive study of film possible for the first time in the 40 year history of motion pictures.

FILM PRESERVATION BEFORE BARRY

In 1891, the Thomas A. Edison Company patented a Kinetoscope to photograph motion pictures and a Kinetograph to project motion pictures. During the 1890s, Edison and others worked to refine production and exhibition techniques; films were first shown commercially in the United States in 1895. The Edison Kinetoscope Co. registered the first film copyright in the United States with the Library of Congress on October 6, 1893. The film was subsequently lost by the library, and as such is "symbolic of the fate of thousands of American films in the past" (Dalton, 1991, p. 61).

American films have been lost through deliberate destruction, neglect, fire, and decomposition, although an awareness of the need for film preservation has existed since the medium's infancy. The December 1, 1906 issue of the early film periodical *Views and Film Index* includes an editorial asking the preservation question, "are the manufacturers aware that they are making history?" (Slide, 1992, p. 9). Film historian Terry Ramsaye, in a 1923 *Photoplay* editorial "Lest We Forget," discusses films and film materials and states the need "to specially preserve these things, to hold them together for their sentimental and intrinsic values to the motion picture and its public" (Slide, 1992, p. 15). Films were viewed by a majority of producers and the public during the first half century of their production as "mere entertainment with no importance beyond immediate commercial exploitation" (Dalton, 1991, p. 61). After their initial release, films were considered to be of no value by production companies that didn't want to pay storage costs, and negatives and prints were often destroyed deliberately, or the nitrate film sold for its salvage value as silver was contained in the film base (Weinberg, 1969, p. 7). Studios and distributors saved only those films that were thought to have a re-release value.

In 1914, Columbia University offered the first known instance of film study lectures in the United States. The University had approached the newly formed Famous Player's Film Co. in 1912 with an offer to store one copy of each of its released films—the first known instance of deliberate film preservation (Slide, 1992, p. 17). At the end of the 1920s, both the University of Southern California and the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences began to collect film materials such as papers, scripts, posters, and books on film, but not actual films.

The government agencies charged with collecting films, the Library of Congress and the National Archives, lagged behind private archives in terms of collection until the mid 1960s. The National Archives and Records Service (NARS) was created in June 19, 1934—its new building included 20 film vaults, each with the potential of holding 1000 reels of film. The Archives' Motion Pictures and Sound Recordings Division focused on the collection of both film footage produced by the federal government and films of historic interest, although insufficient government funding and lack of storage space hampered the Division's collection of materials.

The Library of Congress was the "first government institution to collect films, yet over the years much of

America's film heritage slipped through its fingers" (Herrick, 1980, p. 6). The Library is the national repository for copyright items, although copyright law did not specify films until 1912. In the period 1894-1912, film producers deposited at the Library paper contact print copies of their films, copies that were made directly from the negative. The paper print copies were stored in the Division of Prints, per the 1865 copyright law that included photographic images and negatives. The Townsend Act of 1912 included two new copyright categories for film: Class L (motion picture photoplays) and Class M (motion pictures, not photoplays) (Herrick, 1980, p. 6). After passage of the Townsend Act, the Library's Print Division did not have the space or staff to house films, so the Library adopted a policy whereby film producers could submit supporting paper film materials to the Library—e.g., scripts, posters, etc.—in lieu of films. Subsequently, in the 30 year period encompassing 1912-1942, only 30 actual films were collected by the Library.

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART AND IRIS BARRY

Film historian Anthony Slide (1992) states the "serious work of film preservation in the United States can be dated from the founding of the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in 1935" (p. 18). In the 1929 outline of the plan for the museum, Alfred Barr, MOMA's first director, "recommended that commercial and industrial art, theater design, film, and photography" take their rightful position in the museum as art, alongside painting and sculpture (Akermark, 1980, p. 3). Museum trustees urged Barr not to publicize his recommendation until the museum was established, as it was considered "highly unusual to consider films as art or as a medium worth preserving" (MOMA, 1984, p. 18), and a majority of people thought of film as an "industrial product made for a mass market" (p. 527). In a 1932 MOMA pamphlet, "The Public as Artist," Barr wrote that the "only great art [film] peculiar to the twentieth century is practically unknown to the American public most capable of appreciating it" (cited in Akermark, 1980, p. 3). The evolution of MOMA's renowned film library collection can be credited to Barr and to the hiring of Iris Barry in 1932, who was the ideal person to make Barr's idea of treating film as art a reality.

Iris Barry had a background of determination and non-conformist thinking that well suited her for the role of a film preservation pioneer. As a child Barry "shocked

her grandmother by spending every spare hour at the movies,” when films were considered extremely disreputable (Akermark, 1980, p. 11). In 1911, Barry was accepted at Oxford University, but never attended, instead, she traveled to France, working at routine jobs and writing poetry. Barry submitted poetry for publication, and in response received a letter of encouragement from poet Ezra Pound, which established a correspondence between them (Sicherman, 1980, p. 57).

Encouraged by Pound, Barry moved to London in 1916 or 1917, and fell in with a circle that included writers T.S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell, and painter Wyndham Lewis. Barry and Lewis became lovers and had two children out of wedlock, a son born in 1919, and a daughter born in 1920. Barry worked as assistant librarian for the School of Oriental Studies at the University of London until she was hired by friend John Strachey, editor of the newspaper *The Spectator*. Barry began at the newspaper as a reviewer of books and plays, and became the first English newspaper film critic in 1923, the same year she published her first book, *Splashing Into Society*, about art and success. Barry's first marriage was to Alan Porter, *The Spectator's* literary critic.

Barry was a success as a film critic and in 1925 transferred to London's *Daily Mail*, a larger newspaper. Also in 1925, Barry, filmmaker Sidney Bernstein, and writer Ivor Montagu were influential in the organization of the London Film Society, which “helped to transform [the] English intellectual's attitude toward the ‘pictures’ from scorn or condescension to attention and excitement,” as MOMA's Film Library later did in America (Akermark, 1980, p. 7). Barry published *Let's Go to the Pictures* (1925)—published in America as *Let's Go to the Movies* (1926)—in which she discussed her thoughts about “why we slink into the cinema and what happens to us there,” stating that film “is already a visual as well as a dramatic art” and that in films “something is provided for the imagination and emotion is stirred by the simplest things” (vii-ix). Barry also wrote a biography, *Portrait of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (1927) and a novel *The Last Enemy* (1930).

Barry was fired from the *Daily Mail* in 1930 for asking for a salary increase and a paid trip to Hollywood. Her marriage to Porter over, Barry moved to New York City, where to survive, recalled friend Ivor Montagu (1970), she “translated, she ghosted, she scraped for reviews” until she was hired as the MOMA librarian in 1932 (p. 107). Montagu described Barry, at the time she went to America, as a “tiny woman, extremely slim . . . [her] blue eyes were searching and impressive . . . [her]

hair was black” (p. 106). *Remembering Iris Barry* (Akermark, 1980), a collection of colleagues' reminiscences of Barry published by MOMA in 1980, discusses attributes she possessed that were to serve her well as curator of the Film Library as “her intelligence, her knowledge, her enthusiasm for films and for those who loved them,” (p. 5) and “an unmatched capacity for rousing affection and making devoted friends” (p. 7).

THE FILM LIBRARY AT MOMA

MOMA trustee John Hay “Jock” Whitney, an early advocate for the creation of the film library, funded a feasibility study of the prospective film collection which was conducted by Barry (Barry, 1969, p. 21). MOMA's Film Library was set up as the Film Library Corporation, a separate corporate entity from MOMA, with Whitney as President, Barry as Curator, and her second husband John Abbott, a stockbroker, as Director. The Library was funded for 3 years by a \$120,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. The opening of the Film Library was announced on June 25, 1935, its purpose defined as “to trace, catalogue, assemble and exhibit, and circulate a library of film programs so that the motion picture may be studied as the study of literature, enjoyed as any one of the arts” (Bowser, 1962/63, p. 35). The Film Library began screening films in 1935 at a theater in the Museum of Natural History, and in 1936 began a film circulation system that lent films to educational institutions. MOMA built its own theater in 1938.

The Film Library screenings were “the first continuous repertory presentation of classic and contemporary motion pictures . . . [and] have become a model for all other institutions to follow” (Slide, 1992, p. 19). Films presented for the first time “in coherent artistic and historical contexts gained recognition for the cinema as the major new art form of our century” (MOMA, 1984, p. 527). Barry's endeavors resulted in giving “film and even Hollywood a new respectability” and made it possible for viewers to study film and “to contrast and to develop in themselves a set of standards that would serve them in judging other films” (Akermark, 1980, p. 4). Barry later noted that a “lapse of several years is essential before any film can be ‘seen’ properly” (Barry, 1938, p. 383) and compared the study of film and the study of literature, stating that for the latter it is “unthinkable that the only books available . . . should be no more than those published in the last year or so” (Barry, 1945/46, p. 136).

Barry built the MOMA film collection by soliciting donations from both studios and individuals, the latter including film collectors and film personalities and their heirs. Always the enthusiastic curator, Barry and Abbott traveled to Hollywood in 1935 to enlist the assistance of the film industry, who agreed to furnish copies of their films once they ascertained that the film library offered them no commercial competition; studios were thus assured preservation of their films with no storage costs involved. As a result of the Hollywood trip, donations were received from silent film comedian Harold Lloyd, and the film studios of Warner Brothers, Twentieth Century-Fox, Samuel Goldwyn, and Walt Disney. The studios and Barry agreed to arrangements that are still in practice today, in which films are deposited in archives after their original release, with the studio retaining ownership of the rights. The archive, however, is given the rights to exhibit the film, to distribute the film to educational institutions, and to make copies for preservation and study. Private collectors were given copies of the films they had donated. Later significant donations to MOMA included the silent films of actors Douglas Fairbanks, William S. Hart, and Colleen Moore, and the early films of Biograph Studios and the Edison Company. Barry and Abbott went to Europe in 1936 on another successful film scouting expedition which resulted in the acquisition of many classic European silent films and avant-garde films, many of which were unknown to the American public. Barry made agreements with European archives in which she was able to exchange duplicate negatives and prints of MOMA films for copies of films that MOMA didn't possess.

Barry revived interest and critical reevaluation of the virtually forgotten silent film pioneer D.W. Griffith. She was able to collect many Griffith films and film materials; some were acquired through a donation by Biograph Studios and some Barry rescued from a receivership sale (Barry, 1945/46, p. 131). Film historian Richard Griffith comments that in a study Barry made of D.W. Griffith's early films made between 1908-1913, she ascertained that the director "had in 4 short years discovered and laid down all the basic principles of the cinema" (Barry, 1965/1940, p. 5). In 1940, Barry wrote *D.W. Griffith: American Film Master* to accompany a Griffith series at the Film Library that included all of the director's films and artifacts then available.

She had edited and translated *A History of Motion Pictures* by Bardache and Brasillach in 1938, commenting about film that there had "never been more hope for the future" (p. 390). In 1937, Barry and Abbott pre-

sented a pioneering course in film study through the Columbia University Extension" that included guest speakers and the screening of films (Akermark, 1980, p. 10).

Barry was instrumental in the formation of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) in November 1938, in collaboration with film archives in England, France, and Germany. FIAF's purpose was defined as "preserving the important films of the world . . . [and its formation] is a significant recognition of the importance of film as a record of contemporary times" (Slide, 1992, p. 22). Many lost American films were recovered through the activities of FIAF. Barry was also noted for unselfishly reproducing films that "form(ed) the nucleus of new film institutes" (Akermark, 1980, p. 11). Barry's work was recognized by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 1938, when MOMA received a special award "for its significant work in collecting films...and for the first time making available to the public the means of studying the motion picture as one of the arts" (Slide, 1992, pp. 20-21).

The MOMA Film Library eventually held a "majority of the great works of art produced by the motion picture industry," based on Barry's decisions and opinions about what was important and should be preserved and what should perish (Slide, 1992, p. 21). Film producer John Houseman notes that the Museum focused on the "showing of films that Iris Barry considered original and provocative," a selectivity that was to earn Barry both criticism and praise (Akermark, 1980, p. 11). Opinionated and not inclined—unlike later film archivists—to collect films for their cultural importance, Barry saw no merit in, and often refused to screen at the Museum, films that were extremely popular with audiences, but that in her opinion lacked artistic importance, such as *One Way Passage* (1932), *Wuthering Heights* (1939), and the silent serial *The Perils of Pauline* (1914). Barry's colleagues' say she "delighted in unstuffing the self-important and the pompous" (Akermark, 1980, p. 4), and she "refused to be dazzled by pretentious or oversold work . . . [and] cheered the films that had sparks of the future in them" (p. 7). Film historian Arthur Knight recalls her "rejection of snobbism, a searching for the new not only for its own value, but for its linkages with the past" (Akermark, 1980, p. 9). John Houseman recalls that Barry "used her position at the museum to salvage and sustain a number of scholars and filmmakers" that were floundering during World War II, an example being the Spanish director Luis Bunuel (Akermark, 1980, p. 11). In a 1945 article titled "Iris Barry: the Attila of Films," Herb Sterne criticized Barry's

selectivity, writing “because of the uninformed obtuseness and arrogantly dogmatic doctrines of the Library’s curator, Miss Iris Barry, the organization [MOMA] accomplishes but a minimum of what is properly its function . . . [which results in a] fragmentary collection which is but ill fitted to aid the student” (pp. 141-142).

Barry became a United States citizen in 1941, and during World War II served as an advisor to Hollywood directors who were making documentaries. In 1942, Barry assisted the Library of Congress in a program, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, in which MOMA would select films to be kept by the Library from among all the films that had been submitted to the Library for copyright. She became director of the MOMA Film Library in 1946, and the same year was elected president of FIAF. In 1949 the French government made Barry a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor, for her contributions to French film.

BARRY’S LEGACY

In 1951, Barry retired to Fayence in southern France, with a young Frenchman, Pierre Kerroux (Sicherman, 1980, p. 58). Barry last visited New York in 1962 as a honored guest of the first New York Film Festival at Lincoln Center (Akermark, 1980, p. 3). When Barry died of cancer in Marseilles on December 22, 1969, the London Times headed their obituary, “Students of film throughout the world have lost their most respected pioneer” (1970).

Iris Barry established at MOMA the foundations of an American field that would grow tremendously, both at the Museum and nationally. The appointment of Richard Griffith as curator of the MOMA Film Library in 1951 resulted in a broader collection policy that included documentaries and films representative of popular culture as well as art. The Library’s Film Stills Archives was established in 1952 with a large donation by *Photoplay* magazine, followed by donations from individual studios. During the 1960s, the Film Collection expanded to include independent, experimental, and avant-garde films, and today the Film Library holds 8,000 films, extensive special collections, a stills collection, and print material.

Numerous American film archives have been established and expanded since Barry’s reign as curator of the Film Library—e.g., the University of Southern California Film Archives, the UCLA Film Archives, and the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research. The Film Collection at the George Eastman House Museum in Rochester, New York has achieved national

prominence, since its inception in 1948 under the management of curator James Card, who began a policy of collecting important film titles that MOMA didn’t own, thus not duplicating preservation efforts.

The establishment of the federally funded National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), and its subsequent funding of the American Film Institute (AFI) in 1967, has resulted in the rapid growth of, and public awareness of, both film archives and film preservation in the United States. AFI did not have archives, but would “coordinate and stimulate the activities of regional and private institutions,” by coordinating preservation activity and funding (Slide, 1992, p. 75). AFI has greatly increased public awareness of the importance of film preservation through its highly publicized activities.

A tremendous increase in government funding has enabled existing archives to expand their collections and to undertake widespread preservation activities. The film archives at both the National Archives and the Library of Congress have greatly expanded—the latter has become a major repository and preservation site for films gathered by the AFI—and many small film archives—e.g., UCLA and the University of Wisconsin at Madison—have grown to be of national importance. Furthermore, specialization in film archives has begun as “new institutions were created and older archives began to consider [previously ignored] genres in American film history” (Slide, 1992, p. 89). National Film Preservation Acts were passed by Congress in 1988 and 1992, the latter to expire in 1996. The 1992 act charged the Librarian of Congress with making an analysis of, and developing a national plan for, American film preservation, which resulted in the 4 volume *Film Preservation 1993* (Library of Congress, 1993), followed by the *National Film Preservation Plan* (Library of Congress, 1994).

Iris Barry’s legacy to American film archives is pervasive. It is important to remember, in the consideration of contemporary American film archives, that before Iris Barry there were no specialized film exhibitions, no “art” theaters, no revivals, and no film societies, and that film was not considered an art and was thought to be expendable (Akermark, 1980, p. 5). “The movement to archive film began in the United States with the pioneering efforts of MOMA,” (Dalton, 1991, p. 62). At MOMA’s Film Library, Iris Barry was able to remedy the failure of producers, governments, and the public “to comprehend immediately upon the invention of the motion picture camera, the significance of preserving motion pictures,” to elevate film to the status of an art, and to ensure that film is available for study in perpetuity (Bowser & Kuiper, 1980, p. 2).

REFERENCES

- Akermark, M., (Ed.). (1980). *Remembering Iris Barry*. New York: Museum of Modern Art.
- Bardache, M., & Brassillach, R. (1938). *The history of motion pictures* (I. Barry, Ed. and Trans.). New York: W.W. Norton and the Museum of Modern Art.
- Barry, I. (1923). *Splashing into society*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co.
- Barry, I. (1925). *Let's go to the pictures*. New York: Arno.
- Barry, I. (1926). *Let's go to the movies*. New York: Payson and Clarke.
- Barry, I. (1945/46). Why wait for posterity. *Hollywood Quarterly*, 131-137.
- Barry, I. (1947). In search of films. *Sight and Sound* (Summer), 65-67.
- Barry, I. (1965). *D.W. Griffith, American Film Master*. New York: Museum of Modern Art. (Original work published 1940)
- Barry, I. (1969). The film library and how it grew. *Film Quarterly* (Summer), 19-27.
- Bowser, E. (1962/63). Our resources for scholarship. *Film Quarterly* (Winter), 34-45.
- Bowser, Eileen & Kuiper, John, (Eds.). (1980). *A handbook for film archives: Based on the experiences of members of the International Federation of Film Archives*. Brussels: FIAF.
- Dalton, S. (1991). Moving images: Conservation and preservation. In K. Henderson (Ed.), *Conserving and preserving materials in nonbook formats* (Proceedings of the Allerton Institute, November 6-9, 1988). Champaign, IL: Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois.
- Herrick, D. (1980). Toward a national film collection: Motion pictures at the Library of Congress. *Film Library Quarterly*, 13, 5-25.
- Library of Congress. (1993). *Film preservation 1993: A study of the current state of American film preservation: A report of the Librarian of Congress* (4 vols.). Washington, DC: GPO.
- Library of Congress. (1994). *Redefining film preservation: A national plan: Recommendations of the Librarian of Congress in consultation with the National Film Preservation Board*. Washington, DC: GPO.
- Montagu, I. (1970). Birmingham Sparrow: In memoriam, Iris Barry. *Sight and Sound* (Spring), 106-108.
- Museum of Modern Art. (1984). *The Museum of Modern Art*. New York: H.N. Abrams in Association with the Museum of Modern Art.
- Sicherman, B., & Green, C. H., (Eds.). (1980). *Notable American Women: The modern period*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Slide, A. (1992). *Nitrate won't wait: A history of film preservation in the United States*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Sterne, H. (1945). Iris Barry: The Attila of films. *Rob Wagner's Script*, 31, 14-15.
- Students of film throughout the world have lost their most respected pioneer. (1970, January 1). *The London Times*, p. 11.
- Weinberg, H. G. (1969). Lost ones. *Film Comment* (Fall), 6-10.