

# Eileen Bowser – A Life Between Film History, MoMA and FIAF

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Historical Column

Chronique historique

Columna histórica

*This is an interview with Eileen Bowser,<sup>1</sup> FIAF Honorary Member, conducted within the FIAF Oral History Project at Eileen Bowser's home in Greenwich Village, New York City, on 27 July 2009. The interview has been adapted for publication in the Journal of Film Preservation. Minor changes have been included with the agreement and help of Eileen Bowser. The illustrations come from the Eileen Bowser, Christian Dimitriu and FIAF collections.*

**It is a difficult task to do this after the important work Ron Magliozzi<sup>2</sup> has done a couple of years ago for MoMA. So, we'll try to cover other parts of your life, your preferences, and your feelings... My first question is a very large one. Part of it has also been covered by Ron's interview, but I think we could come a little bit back to that: Eileen Bowser, Who are you? Where do you come from? Who were your parents? Tell us a little bit about your childhood.**

I should begin by saying that I have discovered that my memory is not reliable. Everything that I say should be taken with a grain of salt,

because I have often found that I have disremembered things. That said, I was born and raised in Ohio, USA, in a very rural area, in a large family, during the Great Depression, and there wasn't a nearby movie house and we couldn't afford to go to movies very often. I think my earliest movie experience was in a public park where they showed movies for free. This was the Depression, you understand... And I have little memory of those screenings (or maybe only one screening), except somehow I remember a lot of cowboys galloping around on horseback. I think they might have got hold of some grade-B movies for free somewhere, but nevertheless it was enchanting for me as a very small child.



Eileen Bowser at home in New York, July 2009.

**Was it an experience you were sharing with your brothers and sisters? How many were you at home? Did you speak about movies at home? Do you have any sort of remembrance of what the Depression meant?**

There were five children at home. The only thing I remember is my father had memories of going to see *The Birth of a Nation*. But on the rare occasions

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1 Eileen was born in Columbia Station, Ohio, USA, on 18 January 1928.

2 Ron Magliozzi is Assistant Curator at MoMA. He was editor of *Treasures from the Film Archives/a catalog of short silent films held by FIAF archives*, 1988, and the FIAF CD-ROM, and served as Chairman of the Documentation Commission in the 1990s.

that we drove to the nearest town to see a movie, I didn't like to hear my parents discussing the movie on the way home, as I wanted to remain in that dream state as long as I could.

**Your family had to struggle in the Depression?**

We were very poor but I was so young perhaps I didn't feel it really. We always had enough to eat.

**That's happening again today with families. Where did you go to primary school?**

In the town center of Columbia Station, Ohio; for 12 years I was at school there.

**Do you have memories of those times? Do you still have friends in your home town?**

No, I have no contacts from those days. No contacts at all. My class was very small; at graduation there were 18. People were with me probably for the whole 12 years, and I think all of them stayed there. I was the one who left. I no longer have any family there.

**And college?**

Marietta College, on the banks of the Ohio River, where I met my future husband, Bill Bowser, and after that the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where we (my husband and I) attended graduate school. I have a few contacts from those days, but most have died by now.

**I understand that you studied English and Art.**

Yes. In college, it was English major and then Art minor. When I got to graduate school, it was the reverse: Art History major and English minor, at Chapel Hill.

**I learned that you did your Master's thesis on the paintings of Tintoretto.**

Yes, the ones in the Scuola di San Rocco. I did it without actually visiting those paintings in Venice (I did so several times in later years), but the particular thesis was probably easier to do from photographs because I could arrange them on a table (instead of lying on my back on the floor of the Scuola while tourists walked around my head) and examine the relations of movement among them. And that was the subject of my thesis.

**I suppose that all of your sensitivity to images comes from there, even if you had it already with you.**

I think that art history was a good training for film history. And there was of course no film history training in those days; no film courses at all. It wasn't really until very recently that I realized what was significant about the Tintoretto study in my career. It was the fact that it was all about movement within the paintings and from one painting to the next. That surely has a relationship to the film medium.

**And when did movies become the center of your professional attention?**

I wanted to work in an art museum, and after we finished our studies in Chapel Hill we came back to New York and I applied at every art museum in town. The first one which had an opening for me was MoMA, and for about a year and a half I worked at half-time jobs in different departments around

the museum.<sup>3</sup> So, I got a general experience of the art museum, and then there was an opening in the Film Department as secretary to the curator, Richard Griffith.<sup>4</sup>

**That is where you started your relationship with the curatorial aspects of cinema?**

Yes. I came with no knowledge of cinema. But I think I got the best education in the world by working with a very great collection. In addition, I had a great boss in Richard Griffith, who encouraged me to expand my job way beyond the secretarial role; indeed, he provided the assignments.

**The fact that you were working for MoMA was certainly decisive for your idea that film is a form of art.**

The Museum of Modern Art was founded<sup>5</sup> with the idea that film *is* the modern art form of the 20th century. The modern art movement of the Twenties gave birth to that concept, and the Film Department (called the Film Library at that time) was a product of that concept, even though it took a few years after the founding before the Film Department could be established. The founding curator of MoMA, Alfred Barr,<sup>6</sup> who was the moving spirit of the museum, had to convince the various trustees that film is an art. He took them to screenings; he showed

them Eisenstein and Dreyer to convince them that it was art and not just commerce. For us, cinema was always supposed to be about the art of film.

**Many archives seem to collect films for other reasons – history, sociology, media studies, documentation, etc. – than only for art.**

I know, that's true. But I think that all the founding archives of FIAF<sup>7</sup> had the idea of trying to save film as an art from disappearing, as silent film was about to do. It was later that FIAF began to take in the larger idea that all film is important as cultural memory...

**I come myself from an archive where the film as a form of art came before the general collection preservation policy. This latter was somehow subordinated to the film as art. We were collecting films as a form of art, as objects of art.**

I was obliged to give reasons why we should acquire specific films. That was the tradition and still is the procedure at MoMA, to go before the trustee committee concerned with your department and you explain what it is about that work of art that you want to acquire and get their agreement.

**I suppose that the collection policy was very much the choice of the curator of MoMA. Or was it yours?**

It was the choice of the Film Department's curatorial staff. It was the choice



Eileen on her father's lap with the rest of the family.

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3 Eileen started her job at MoMA in 1953, and entered the Department of Film in January 1955.

4 Richard Griffith (1912-1969), Curator/Director of the Film Department, 1949-1965.

5 MoMA was founded in New York on 7 November 1929.

6 Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (1902-1981) was an art historian and the first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

7 FIAF was founded in Paris on 26 June 1938.

of the person who presented the proposed acquisition before the trustees, who was always a curator. In the case of film, most of the trustees had little knowledge about what we were doing. It takes much more time to look at a film than at a painting, at least for their purposes. Of course you can look at a painting, too, for many hours.

**Did the different curators of the Film Department have the final choice?**

If a MoMA curator brought before the trustees a Picasso that he or she wanted to acquire and they said: yes, fine, a trustee was supposed to speak up to provide the funds for that. They weren't prepared to do that for films and they didn't know the films. Although whenever I presented acquisitions to the trustees, I always cordially invited them to look at the films in question in our projection room. Normally they didn't take up that offer. So we tended to go our own way, more than the other departments of MoMA.



Around the table: Eileen Bowser, Vladimir Pogacic, Jacques Ledoux, Brigitte van der Elst, Jan De Vaal and Einar Lauritzen. Varna, 1975.

**You started as associate curator in 1967 and you became full curator in 1976. And that's when you started also having much more to say about collection policy. Did the choice of**

**films you were collecting evolve with the different curators?**

I would say so, yes. But also so much depends on circumstance and luck, because like all the film archives we depended a lot on getting donations, you know, and you take whatever is in them for the sake of the ones you want.

**So we will deliberately skip over your career at MoMA.**

It is pretty solidly covered in the MoMA interview. And there is much more there than just the published piece that Ron Magliozzi did: there are tapes which are freely available for researchers at MoMA.

**You have been quite active also as an author; you have done research, and published *The Transformation of Cinema*,<sup>8</sup> which was an important work in your career. Did you also write other things, I mean, literature...**

I have an interest in writing poetry, but I have written very little of it. No, no. My efforts – and my interests – go to film history.

**Did you in any way participate in filmmaking, directing, or producing?**

No, I somehow never had any interest in doing that.

**You were distinguished with the Jean Mitry Award.<sup>9</sup> Was it for one of your publications?**

No, the publication date of the book was 1990 and the Award was in 1989.

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8 Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema*, Vol. II in the series *History of American Cinema*, Scribner's, New York, 1990.

9 The Jean Mitry Award was awarded to Eileen Bowser in 1989 by Le Giornate del Cinema Muto (Pordenone).

I was active in helping the Giornate del Cinema Muto<sup>10</sup> in their early years. I lent some films, I think before other archivists were willing to trust them, and they were always extremely grateful for that. It was partly for that and partly for my work as an archivist and film historian.

**The co-operation between MoMA and FIAF started early, at Brighton, or even before. For that, you have become an emblematic figure in FIAF, and FIAF has learned a lot from you...**

I can say from the beginning that FIAF has been very important in my life, just as MoMA was. In the years of belonging to FIAF I became more of a professional at what I was doing. At the same time I think that FIAF itself grew more professional. FIAF was also growing during the years I was there. It's astonishing when I think of it...

When I came to a FIAF Congress the first time, I was asked to join the newly formed Documentation and Cataloguing Commission. The Preservation Commission had already been formed, I think fairly recently before I came, but then the new commission was the second step. I was invited by our Director at the time, Willard Van Dyke,<sup>11</sup> to go to the Congress in London, and I even didn't know why. That would be in 1968. I didn't know why I was there until I got there. The first day of the Congress we were selected to form the commissions and asked to go into another room and start organizing ourselves. And so I didn't really see that congress in action, because we were in another room trying to figure out what we were supposed to do.

**After Langlois<sup>12</sup> left, between 1968 and 1973 several important things happened in FIAF. The Documentation Commission was created; the *Film Bulletin*, which later became the *JFP*, was created.**

I think there were earlier efforts at a journal of sorts. It struggled a lot for years. It was a private publication for the FIAF members in the beginning. It was supposed to be like the Annual Reports, where you report not just your successes, but your failures and your problems.

**Who influenced you most in those decisive years of intensive work in FIAF?**

I started in FIAF on the Executive Committee.<sup>13</sup> That was strange. So I've always had this kind of inside view of FIAF and not what it is like to be an ordinary member, because for 20 years I was on the EC. It was kind of an accident that I began that way: we held a Congress in New York in 1969; Willard Van Dyke was our Director then and our representative in FIAF. It was my impression that Willard and Jacques Ledoux<sup>14</sup> were at odds. Nobody told me this. You just could see it when they talked to each other

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10 Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, the Pordenone Silent Film Festival, was founded in 1982.

11 Willard Van Dyke (1906-1986), filmmaker and photographer, Director of the Film Department at MoMA from 1965 to 1974.

12 Henri Langlois (1914-1977), co-founder and Secretary General of the Cinémathèque Française in 1936, co-founder of FIAF in 1938, and Member of the FIAF Executive Committee and Vice-President from 1966 to 1969.

13 Eileen Bowser was a member of the FIAF Executive Committee from 1969 to 1987, and served as Vice-President from 1977 to 1985. She was President of the FIAF Documentation Commission from 1972 to 1981.

14 Jacques Ledoux (1921-1988), Director of the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique, 1948-1988, founder of the Musée du Cinéma in 1962. Member of the FIAF EC from 1959 to 1979, FIAF Secretary General from 1961 to 1978.

and got red in the face. So when it came to talk about the election of the next Executive Committee, Willard Van Dyke said no. He wasn't going to be a candidate for the Executive Committee this year because he didn't have the travel money, but actually it was because he was angry. So Jacques Ledoux said: "Well, then, what about Eileen?" This was in the presence of the whole Congress, and I was unprepared and embarrassed. I said, "I don't know whether I can accept to be a candidate or not." And Willard said:

"Yes, go ahead." So anyway, whatever the real causes were, to my surprise I was elected to the EC in 1969 in New York, and didn't leave until we instituted term limits and my term ran out near my retirement. When I went to my first meetings, Jerzy Toeplitz was the President. He was a very strong leader and a bit intimidating to me going to my first international meetings, but I got over that.

I suppose that most influential for me was Ernest Lindgren. To me it seems as though I knew him for a long time, but in fact it was not so many years before he died. At first he seemed to me someone pompous and stiff, but in the end, not at all. I came to admire and respect his point of view very much.



Sitting: Martin Scorsese and Lilian Gish;  
standing: Eileen Bowser and William K. Everson.

**David Francis in one of his articles, actually on Harold Brown, also paid tribute to Ernest Lindgren. Ernest had very interesting points of view. He was a sort of leader in his way.** He talked at great length during meetings and wrote letters that were very long. And I was already familiar with these letters. I already knew them from the letters to MoMA. He was deeply involved in thinking about the policy of film archives and preservation.

**There are many of these letters concerning FIAF: it is a quite unknown part of FIAF history to be investigated.**

And there was Jacques Ledoux, of course, who was a very great influence from beginning to end of my career, really up to the point when he died. I was very fond of Jacques. Jacques had an incredible enthusiasm for archive work. We could never sit down to talk anywhere – and we did that over some wonderful meals, he knew and loved good food – without immediately diving into some point, some discussion about archival work, archival problems. He was obsessed with that. He was the kind of man who had to control everything, every detail. It must have been hard to work for him at the Cinémathèque. I couldn't have done that.

**Did Jacques visit you often in New York?**

Oh yes, many times. I had met him before I went to FIAF. I had met him, as well as Henri Langlois and Einar Lauritzen.<sup>15</sup> These are the people I remember meeting in New York.

**These were the pioneers and the immediate post-war generation. Did you have positive experiences with the younger generations?**

Of course I was meeting people then in the commissions. This is where my .....

<sup>15</sup> Einar Lauritzen (1912-2005), founder of the Swedish Film Archive, FIAF EC Member and Treasurer, 1953-1955 and 1958-1965, and Honorary Member of FIAF.

real work in FIAF began. I could take a position within FIAF because we were involved with the Periodical Indexing Project in those years. And this was a project I had to fight for over and over again in FIAF because we were always on the financial edge.

**This is precisely one of the important things that happened in FIAF in those years. They were planned around '68 and carried out or started between 1968 and 1973. The same with the Periodical Indexing Project, the PIP.**

I think they were activities that brought FIAF before the world in a way that it had not been before. It may have seemed to some outsiders to be some kind of private club...

**Who was with you at the beginning of the PIP?**

Brenda Davies<sup>16</sup> was the Chairman of the Documentation and Cataloguing Commission. We were meeting in London, where she was head of the Documentation Department of the NFA/BFI. Karen Jones of the Danish Filmmuseum was the instigator of the PIP, which became the most significant accomplishment of our Commission. The Commission was both documentation and cataloguing to begin with. And I remember my dear friend Myrtil Frida<sup>17</sup> from Prague was there; that's where I met him. The Commission split into two within a year or so because we found that the work did not have that much in common: cataloguing and documentation were separate departments in the archives, even though we worked in collaboration, and so we split up. I know the two Commissions have reunited these days. I am sure to forget exactly who was there from the first, but I think it was Wolfgang Klaue, Roger Holman of the BFI Cataloguing Department, Filip Acimovic from Belgrade, Dorothea Gebauer from Wiesbaden, Myrtil Frida, and they joined Cataloguing after the split. Karen Jones, Eberhard Spiess<sup>18</sup> from Wiesbaden, Brenda Davies, Mr. Vimr from Prague, and myself joined Documentation. Jacques Ledoux managed to go back and forth between the Commissions, because he wanted to be part of everything. We met as a Commission twice a year, at least in the early years. We were thinking of projects that we could do in collaboration, because when we sat down together we discovered that archives were all doing the same tasks and sometimes we were duplicating each others' work. We discovered that there could be a real economy if we could collaborate on some of these projects. Of course the periodical indexes were the most important. But there were other things we did when we started, like indexing some periodicals or books that we all held that didn't have any index and sharing that with the other archives, or exchanging lists of periodical holdings for purposes of exchange, or to help complete runs. Later, there was the classification scheme for libraries of publications on film.

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16 Brenda Davies (1919-1996) was head of documentation at the National Film Archive/ British Film Institute, and served as the first Chairman of the FIAF Documentation and Cataloguing Commission (later, Documentation Commission).

17 Myrtil Frida (1919-1978) was head of the Národní Filmový Archiv in Prague and Member of the FIAF EC from 1969 to 1971.

18 Eberhard Spiess (1926-2007) was head of documentation at the Deutsche Institute für Filmkunde (DIF), Wiesbaden, and served as member and chairman of the FIAF Documentation Commission after Brenda Davies.

**Now it's the Cataloguing and Documentation Commission. What do you think about it?**

Oh, I think it was very necessary to be separate at the time, because they were really two such different activities. The staff members were specialists in one or the other. I don't know what the reasons for reuniting them were, but I suppose the goals have changed with the times. For me, in a small archive, I had to be involved with both cataloguing and documentation. So maybe if you are serving a small archive it makes sense to combine them. And even after I became curator I was still involved in cataloguing.



Vladimir Pogacic, Eileen Bowser, Jan De Vaal in Paris, 1988.

**Another important project that started also in those years was the FIAF Summer School, initiated in East Berlin; and I think that you participated in the organization of the first specialist summer school outside Eastern Germany, in Copenhagen.**

We did the first, and as far as I know, the only FIAF Documentation Summer School, which was organized in Copenhagen with teachers from the Documentation Commission, and the chief organizer was Karen Jones,<sup>19</sup> who was the librarian in the Danish archive. It was a very successful event, in my opinion. I have to be sure to put in the record that I was the face of the PIP project to FIAF, so that I sometimes get more credit for it than I should. It was Karen Jones, her idea, her force, her hard work, her dedication. I was only the one who came along and helped enable the project to go. We were a team, but primarily credit should be given to her. Most of the projects undertaken by the Documentation Commission were her ideas.



Eileen Bowser and Einar Lauritzen in the late 1970s.

**Do you remember when Michael Moulds took over the PIP? Did he work with you at the beginning? Did you have French-speaking participants in this project?**

No, I can't remember exactly when Michael joined the Commission or took over the PIP. John Luijkk from Amsterdam and Frances Thorpe from London soon joined the Commission. A little later, we added

Anne Schlosser<sup>20</sup> at the American Film Institute Library, Milka Staykova from Sofia, Aura Puran from Bucharest, Alfred Krautz from East Berlin, Michelle Snapes (Aubert)<sup>21</sup> from London. I hope I will be forgiven for not thinking of everyone; all were important contributors. Almost everybody in

19 Karen Jones, Librarian, Danish Film Archive, served on the FIAF Documentation Commission, and was editor of FIAF's Periodical Indexing Project, the PIP.

20 Anne Schlosser, Librarian at the American Film Institute.

21 Michelle Aubert was documentation officer at the National Film and Television Archive in London before becoming film curator at the CNC in Bois d'Arcy. She was a member of the FIAF Executive Committee from 1991 to 1993, and FIAF President from 1995 to 1999. She was active in the P.I.P. from its beginnings, and played a major role in its development in the late 1990s.

Cette interview a été conduite dans le cadre du projet « Histoire orale de la FIAF » au domicile d'Eileen Bowser, à New York, le 27 juillet 2009. Le présent texte a été revu et corrigé pour sa publication dans le JFP. Les modifications apportées à la transcription de l'interview ont été effectuées avec l'aide, voire la complicité amicale de l'interviewée.

Singulier parcours que celui d'Eileen Bowser : née à Columbia Station, Ohio, d'une famille nombreuse, dans une région agricole, elle garde un souvenir très lointain mais ému de son enfance, de ses dimanches au cinéma avec les membres de sa famille, à l'époque de la Grande Dépression. C'est à Columbia Station qu'elle suit sa scolarité et qu'elle rencontre son futur mari, Bill Bowser, avec qui plus tard elle s'installera à New York, dans le quartier du West Village. À l'Université de Chapel Hill, elle consacrera son travail de diplômé au Tintoret, et orientera sa sensibilité vers le monde de l'image. Riche de cette première expérience, elle pourra poser sa candidature dans plusieurs musées de New York et, en 1953, réussira à décrocher ses premiers jobs au célèbre MoMA, pour entrer dans le Département Film en 1955, devenir conservateur film adjoint en 1967, et conservateur titulaire en 1976. Elle prendra sa retraite en 1993.

Pendant les 50 années passées au MoMA, Eileen Bowser fut témoin et protagoniste privilégiée du développement du Musée et du Département Film. Elle y devint la grande spécialiste du cinéma des premiers temps aux États-Unis et y déploya son talent de conservateur à une époque où le cinéma acquit ses titres de noblesse grâce à la politique de sélection dynamique des dirigeants de l'institution, souvent inspirés par la sagesse d'Eileen Bowser. Sa trajectoire nationale connut son point culminant avec la publication de son livre *The Transformation of Cinema, Vol. II* de la série *History of American Cinema*, 1990.

Forte de la formidable expérience acquise au Département Film, Eileen réunissait les meilleures conditions pour représenter le MoMA dans les rencontres internationales au moment où les échanges entre cinémathèques offraient les meilleures perspectives de constitution des fonds d'œuvres du 7<sup>ème</sup> Art. Sur le plan international, ses

the Commission was a librarian except me, so it's no wonder I took a back seat in the projects. I was the one that sold them to FIAF, so to say.

**Right after the war, judging from the minutes, the official language was more French than English. I think that even Jerzy Toeplitz,<sup>22</sup> though he was speaking English, exchanged official correspondence in French. And, of course, Langlois.**

They resumed in French again when Raymond Borde<sup>23</sup> became Secretary General. Raymond and I had a funny kind of relationship because he wouldn't speak a word of English. And I had very little French when I started in FIAF. I improved some over the years but never became fluent in speaking French. After sitting there with Raymond during the Executive Committee meetings and listening to translations of what he would say, I began to come to understand his French at least, if not all the other French speakers. Raymond was passionate about FIAF, cinema, and film archives and film history, a wonderful man.

**Raymond's French was very pleasant. He spoke very distinctively. He had always good anecdotes to tell, related to film history and not only to preservation work.**

Another with language problems was Victor Privato from Gosfilmofond. He always traveled with translators. He was a grandfatherly sort of man at the time I knew him, and gave very thoughtful, considered opinions in the discussions. We spent some breakfasts together without a translator, smiling at each other, maybe saying "good morning" and "thank you" in each other's language. FIAF was one of those rare international organizations that was truly international across all political boundaries, and at the same time it was an organization that was working, that was achieving things, not just a figurehead. At that time it was rare among international organizations I knew anything about. During the Cold War, I was traveling to countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain, as we called it then, and had good friends in the archives everywhere. In a way, that fulfilled some of my youthful dreams about the world.

**I think also that FIAF has been adapting to different situations, because it started like a socially high cultural event right before World War II, in New York, with the first Congress,<sup>24</sup> then it went on as a very exclusive club after World War II, and in further stages it has been adapting to different international situations.**

I was thinking about all those years that we spent so much time talking about membership: defining membership, deciding what were the qualifications for membership, principles and policies. And I realized that what we were really doing was defining ourselves: who we were and what we were trying to do. That's why over and over again we have to keep discussing the same issues. We were changing. You can see the point, for example, in the 1980s when we really began to expand. And as the old guard died off or retired, more and more people wanted the expanded FIAF, the more inclusive FIAF,

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22 Jerzy Toeplitz (1909-1995), founder of the Łódź Film School. FIAF President from 1948 to 1971.

23 Raymond Borde (1920-2004), founder of the Cinémathèque de Toulouse. Member of the FIAF EC from 1966 to 1991.

24 The first FIAF Congress met for several days in New York, starting on Tuesday 26 July 1939.

capacités de conservateur de cinéma furent récompensées avec le Prix Jean Mitry à Pordenone en 1989.

Mais c'est dès 1969 qu'Eileen fit son entrée dans la FIAF par un concours exceptionnel de circonstances, et du coup par la grande porte. Son chef, le cinéaste Willard Van Dyke, ne voulant pas se présenter aux élections du Comité directeur, accepta l'invitation faite par Jacques Ledoux de proposer, au nom du MoMA, la candidature d'Eileen Bowser. C'est ainsi qu'Eileen commença une longue et exceptionnelle trajectoire en tant que membre du Comité. À partir de ce poste d'observation privilégié, elle participa très activement à de nombreux projets de la FIAF, tels que la création du P.I.P., le Journal of Film Preservation, la Commission de documentation et de catalogage. Elle fut également associée à de nombreux projets de conservation et de restauration, d'échanges de programmes, d'échanges de documentation et d'information et lança, avec d'autres collègues, le projet « Domitor ». L'activité rêvée d'Eileen dans les années 1950, celle de conservateur de collections de cinéma, était devenue une profession.

Après sa retraite, en janvier 1993, commence une nouvelle étape dans la vie d'Eileen Bowser : elle participe à de nombreuses activités de recherches universitaires, fait partie de jurys, voit les programmes offerts au public au MoMA et dans d'autres institutions de New York, à Pordenone et dans d'autres manifestations, aux États-Unis et ailleurs. Singulier parcours en effet que celui de cette fillette de famille nombreuse de l'Ohio, devenue une figure emblématique au sein de notre communauté des archives et musées du film.

that includes all kinds of film organizations. I know that it's really quite broad today compared to when I started.

Today, I'm very glad to see that *the* basic principles are still there, like this argument we are still having today about having to keep the nitrate, about having to preserve film as film, in the digital age. This is a constant struggle.

**This is one of our basic tasks. It is a sort of pedagogical mission that FIAF has to carry on and achieve permanently.**

We used to say when we were discussing a potential new affiliate: Well, let's add them as observers and let them see by coming to FIAF what they should be doing. It was an educational experience. We could influence the development of archives.

**The categories of Affiliates have now changed, but the principles are always the same. This is now aimed at in the FIAF Code of Ethics.<sup>25</sup>**

That's all changed since my day, but of course, with the wider inclusion of membership it is not so important. When we were trying to restrict it to archives that fulfilled all these basic functions, preservation primarily, one had to be careful that in accepting a new archive you didn't get someone who you didn't know very well and who later proved to be unreliable. If they were interested only in showing films and not in preserving them, then films would become damaged or lost. If they would not respect the copyrights of the producers, we all would suffer from suspicion. So there was always a preliminary period.

**I would say this is a quite demanding procedure. It reminds us of a symbolic initiation ritual, but of course there still remain some risks in not knowing who the candidate really is.**

I can remember the severe struggles during the 1970s and early 80s: Some archives were trying to avoid this proliferation of film archives in their country on the theory that there were limited resources for the archives and they didn't want to spread them out among a group of archives. The USA was a leader in breaking through that, because we *had* multiple archives, and we could co-operate together instead of fighting for the resources. And we began to develop the concept that we had one national collection. It was simply stored in different archives, not just one.

There were very many different models of funding within our country: the Library of Congress and the National Archives were government-funded, but then there were also privately-funded organizations, like the George Eastman House, the Museum of Modern Art, or some university film archives which probably get some state support. But at MoMA, we never had any state support apart from occasional grant support for specific projects.

**Things have changed a little since the specialized archives, regional archives, the city archives appeared. A city with an interesting archive would never contribute any sort of money to the safeguarding of a film deposited at a national film archive. But these kinds of archives might get significant sums to have their own films safeguarded. So, the more**

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25 The FIAF Code of Ethics was inspired by ideas developed by David Francis and Ray Edmondson since 1993, and was adopted in its current version in 1998.

**archives there are, the more resources are made available.**

Jacques Ledoux was always, to the end, a bitter fighter against this. He was a purist about what a FIAF archive should be. A lot also depends on the personality of the archivists too, as to whether they can collaborate or not.

**There is one important and dear subject to all of us: the *Journal of Film Preservation (JFP)*, in which you have invested so much knowledge, energy, and enthusiasm. You are really one of the four or five persons who are currently working a lot on it, and FIAF could never be grateful enough for what you have done for the *JFP*. What is your feeling about the evolution of the *JFP*?**

I think it's become a serious publication. The last issue particularly,<sup>26</sup> is a journal that would be of interest to anybody in the field, not just to the FIAF archives. And considering that it grew from a simple newsletter among the archives, trying to keep each other informed as to the activities – it is impressive.

**What is your feeling about what we're doing? About the diversity of our editorial choices?**

I haven't had a very strong influence actually on the editorial policy. I am one of several sub-editors and I'm occasionally a contributor. Everything that happens in the world of cinema is of interest to the readers of our Journal; the problem is to find the guidelines to narrow it to our specialty, which is the art and science of film archiving.

**In past years, we had the problem of not having a large choice of articles, but now we're getting to a point where we can choose.**

I know it was always a struggle to get people to contribute. It is understandable when the language problem has always been there. While everybody in the field, I'm sure, can read some article in English, that doesn't mean they can write something in English or French or Spanish. I suppose that with the proliferation of film archives we have more people who are available.

Of course, you don't want to print something only because it's there. You cannot have an editorial policy that way. But there have been some good articles that have followed what FIAF was discussing in its Congresses, on very important issues. That truly is very useful, because it keeps it in people's minds between the Congresses, so that when they arrive at the Congress they know what is going on and are ready to join the discussion. That always was a problem: people on the Executive Committee were *au courant* about the issues, while the other members came to the Congress once a year. We had a hard time always in organizing Congresses trying to find a way to get people involved.

**We work in better conditions than 20 years ago, also because we have the symposia, workshops, and other opportunities for choosing articles. How do you feel about the trilingual aspect of our Journal? Is it a genuine plus?**

Of course. That immediately makes it possible for more people to contribute. The more you can spread the languages, the more people are capable of contributing, although there would be great difficulty in having a lot of

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<sup>26</sup> *Journal of Film Preservation* 79/80, May 2009.

languages. Those three seem to be just right. There is not so much Spanish, but it's growing. And I think that now we have so many Spanish-language members, there is a much more active participation. It was an important step when Spanish was made part of the official languages of FIAF.

**What else could contribute to this expansion of the cultural scope of FIAF?**

There was another thing that happened during my years, and that was the involvement with UNESCO, for which we should give, I think, the highest credit to Wolfgang Klaue.<sup>27</sup> He was always the most active worker in that field, which gave us a place on the world stage and gave us more power to influence policies, and indeed we were behind the UNESCO resolution on the Preservation of Moving Images.

**The Recommendation for the Safeguarding and Preservation of Moving Images, announced in Belgrade in 1980.**

And I was lucky enough to be a representative of FIAF at one of the early meetings, which also took place in Belgrade, the meeting that first discussed the subject with UNESCO,<sup>28</sup> but I was not at all the prime figure, for it was surely Wolfgang Klaue above all. And this was such an important document, because it could be used in the individual countries for archives to get more resources, more prestige, more standing in their countries on the basis of UNESCO.

**It has become very difficult to do things together with UNESCO. In particular, there are many other international associations competing with us on a certain level.**

We had to get out of membership of one of those organizations, the Council of Film and Television Archives. They had the Category B status in UNESCO and they were not being effective representatives at all of what we needed. So eventually we managed to leave that organization and become a Category B member on our own, which entitled us to apply for grants for projects. And we got quite a lot of support, though UNESCO doesn't have a lot of money, but we got financial support for a number of projects during the years.

**Also for the fact that we are listed in UNESCO's list of associations that have a formal advisory status. Furthermore, we are committed to organizing common projects, especially the Joint Technical Symposium,<sup>29</sup> which we started together with IFTA/FIAT in 1983.**

We have authority when there are questions about preservation of the world's moving image heritage; people will come to us for advice, which based on our experiences we are qualified to give. As for FIAT, it was just getting organized at that point. When they were founded, there was a great deal of debate as to what was our relationship to them, because some of our members were collecting film and television, and the majority

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27 Wolfgang Klaue was Director of the Staatliches Filmarchiv der DDR. A member of the FIAF EC from 1969 to 1989, he served as FIAF President from 1979 to 1985, and is currently a FIAF Honorary Member.

28 UNESCO Recommendation for the Safeguarding and Preservation of Moving Images, Belgrade, 1980.

29 The First Joint Technical Symposium took place during the FIAF Congress in Stockholm in May 1983.

Esta entrevista tuvo lugar en el marco del proyecto « Historia oral de la FIAF » en casa de Eileen Bowser, en Nueva York, el 27 de julio 2009. El texto fue revisado y corregido para su publicación en el JFP. Las modificaciones aportadas a la transcripción de la entrevista fueron efectuadas con la ayuda y la complicidad amistosa de la entrevistada.

Singular trayectoria la de Eileen Bowser: nacida en Columbia Station, Ohio, en una región agrícola, mantiene un recuerdo lejano pero emocionado de su niñez, de sus domingos en el cine con los miembros de su familia, en la época de la Gran Depresión. En Columbia Station va a la escuela y conoce a su futuro marido, Bill Bowser, con quién más adelante se instalará definitivamente en el West Village en Nueva York. En la Universidad de Chapel Hill, dedicará su diploma al Tintoretto, y orientará su sensibilidad hacia el mundo de la imagen. Esta primera experiencia, le permitirá presentar su candidatura a varios museos de Nueva York y, en 1953, obtendrá su primer empleo en el célebre MoMA, para ingresar en su Departamento de Cine en 1955, ser nombrada curadora de cine adjunta en 1967, y curadora titular en 1976. Eileen pasará a retiro en 1993.

Durante los 50 años de trabajo en el MoMA, Eileen Bowser fue testigo y protagonista privilegiada de la expansión del Museo y de su Departamento de Cine. Es ahí que se transforma en la gran especialista del cine de los primeros tiempos en los Estados-Unidos y que despliega su talento de curadora en una época en que el cine adquiere sus títulos de nobleza gracias a la política de selección dinámica de los dirigentes de la institución, a menudo inspirados por la sabiduría de Eileen Bowser. Su trayectoria nacional alcanzó un punto culminante con la publicación de su libro *The Transformation of Cinema, Vol. II* de la serie *History of American Cinema, 1990*.

Enriquecida por su formidable experiencia adquirida en el Departamento de cine, Eileen reúne las mejores condiciones para representar al MoMA en los encuentros internacionales en el preciso momento en que los intercambios entre cinematecas ofrecían las mejores perspectivas para la constitución de

were not. The BFI and the Library of Congress were important collectors of television material.

But we did finally find ways to collaborate with IFTA/FIAT. We could not accept the commercial television archives as FIAF members. The aims and principles were very different. The Joint Technical Symposiums were the solution for the most useful collaboration.

### **Let's come back to the contacts you had with colleagues in FIAF, in those times.**

There were the pioneers, of course. I came in a generation after the pioneers. Some of them were already gone: Iris Barry<sup>30</sup> and John Abbott, Henri Langlois, Frank Hensel. I was lucky enough, as I said before, to know Ernest Lindgren,<sup>31</sup> not so many years before he died. I remember that although we hadn't been particularly friendly or talked to each other all that much outside of meetings, when he developed a brain tumor and I think he knew that his death was probably imminent, at his last meeting he sat down beside me in a bus. I don't even remember what city or where we were going, but that was unusual for him, and he sat down and proceeded to talk to me about Iris Barry, and how important she had been as his mentor when he was starting out. And I thought at the time he was saying this to *me* as representative of Iris because I came from MoMA: I was really very touched by that and I thought that it makes a kind of chain if he was inspired by Iris, because I was inspired by him. I also remember that he was *the* authority on the English language for FIAF documents. He hated any American spellings or usage to get into the records. And once he died, guess who became the authority on the English language? Me! I had to say what was the correct way. Of course it switched over quite a bit to American usage and American spelling.

### **In which way was Iris Barry his mentor? And when did she move to Europe?**

I think in imbuing him with the enthusiasm and the possibilities... She was a very important person in the EC when he first came to FIAF. He was not the first one to represent the London archive; it was Olwen Vaughn, I think. And so, he came as a young man to this little group of archivists of FIAF. Henri Langlois has also said that he regarded Iris as a mentor at that time. And then after she retired she was still our representative in FIAF. She retired to live in the South of France, and I think she remained our representative chiefly because Richard Griffith hated to travel; he was afraid of flying. He resisted going to FIAF. She was paid a small sum by MoMA to be our European representative, and then she would report back. It was of course not a good system, because we did not have a first-hand knowledge of what was going on in the world of archives. It was a mistake to not actually be there meeting the people and making contacts. Anyway, that lasted a few years. Richard went to some meetings, but not all of them. He was never very active in FIAF. So while Iris was in Europe she was still attending the EC meetings and the Congress, up to point when she died or became incapacitated.

30 Iris Barry (1895-1968) was Curator of the Film Department at MoMA, FIAF Secretary General in 1948, and Founder President from 1949 till 1968.

31 Ernest Lindgren (1910-1973) was Head of the National Film Archive, London, and served in several capacities as FIAF EC Member, most of the terms as VP, from 1946 to 1973.

fondos de obras del 7° Arte. En el plano internacional, sus capacidades de curadora de cine fueron recompensadas con el Premio Jean Mitry en Pordenone en 1989.

Pero es a partir de 1969 que Eileen se acerca a la FIAF por una coincidencia excepcional de circunstancias, y por la gran puerta. Su jefe, el director de cine Willard Van Dyke, quién no quería presentarse como a las elecciones del Comité ejecutivo en Nueva York, acepta la propuesta que le hace Jacques Ledoux de proponer como candidato del MOMA, a Eileen Bowser. Es así que Eileen comienza una larga y excepcional trayectoria como Miembro del Comité. A partir de ese puesto de observación privilegiado, participa de manera activa en numerosos proyectos de una FIAF en plena expansión, tales como la creación del P.I.P., el *Journal of Film Preservation*, la Comisión de documentación y de catalogación, y se ve asociada a numerosos proyectos de preservación, de intercambios de programas documentación e información, participando asimismo en la creación, con algunos colegas, del proyecto "Domitor". La actividad que soñaba Eileen en los años 1950, la de curadora de colecciones de cine, se había convertido en una nueva profesión.

Luego de su retiro, en enero 1993, se abre una nueva etapa en la vida de Eileen Bowser: participa en numerosos proyectos de investigación universitarios, forma parte de jurados, asiste a los programas ofrecidos al público por el MoMA y otras instituciones culturales de Nueva York, en Pordenone y otras manifestaciones en los Estados Unidos y el extranjero.

Singular recorrido, por cierto, el de esta niña de una familia numerosa del Ohio, transformada en una figura emblemática en el seno de la comunidad internacional de archivos y museos cinematográficos.

### **And that's when your contact with Ernest Lindgren started, during his last years...**

Yes, and strictly through the EC meetings, I got to know him well. It's rather strange when you think the members of the EC met at that time maybe three times a year, later just two, but when we were together, we were together very intensively, from breakfast to bedtime; we were together for meals and we were talking all day at the meetings. So you did really get to know people very well. And to become good friends. Or, as many like to think of it, a family.

### **And from this period of EC meetings, who else were close friends?**

Einar Lauritzen, who was there as an Honorary Member from the time I was there. He was a contrast to the other honorary members, because Einar was a bit shy about speaking in public and he got the idea, probably self-protective, that as an honorary member he wasn't really supposed to offer opinions, but just respond when occasionally he was asked something. While Herbert Volkmann, when he became an Honorary Member, he was still running the Preservation Commission, he took a constant and active position; he had an opinion on everything, and very strong ones indeed. Another good friend was Jon Stenklov of Norway. We made common cause over many issues in the EC because, as he said, sometimes we were the only two who had common sense! Who else? Vladimir Pogacic<sup>32</sup> from Yugoslavia became a good friend. He was maybe not one of the great leaders, but he was very dedicated to the work, he loved to be part of FIAF, and there is no doubt about his sincerity and loyalty. And you know, you don't need a really strong President when you have a strong Secretary General; and Jacques Ledoux was that. But of course when Wolfgang Klaue became President he was a much stronger one. He could make me think of Toeplitz in a way; he did a lot to direct the way the FIAF was going. He was someone that I came to respect enormously.

### **Let me ask you about the Congress you organized in New York in 1985, which was in some ways your lifetime Congress, because, I mean, not everybody can organize two FIAF Congresses...**

Willard Van Dyke was the organizer of the first New York Congress held during my tenure, but I did do a lot of work for it. The second one, I did really almost by myself. If I hadn't had Ron Magliozzi, who was extremely helpful, how I would have managed... I didn't have any secretarial help nor any kind of help. I go to other congresses and there is a whole staff of people who go around and do this, do that. I felt that I was all on my own.

### **What was the main contribution of this Congress to the FIAF community?**

Above all it was the Slapstick Symposium, because that has had a lasting influence, I'm glad to say. This is quite what a historical symposium should do. And this is a topic which is still growing. You know that there was another slapstick symposium organized by Tom Paulus, called *Another*

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32 Vladimir Pogacic (1919-1999), theatre and film director. His film *Nevjera* was in Cannes in 1956; he was awarded the best filmmaker prize in Karlovy Vary in 1956 for *Veliki i mali*. Director of the Jugoslovenska Kinoteka in Belgrade (1954-1981), he was elected to the FIAF Executive Committee from 1960 to 1981. He succeeded Jerzy Toeplitz as FIAF President until 1978.

*Slapstick Symposium*, held in Brussels a few years ago, and the proceedings are to be published as a book this fall (2009) by the American Film Institute. I'm really glad to see that interest continues in a subject that still obsesses me.

**What other personalities do you remember from FIAF? Let's not speak only about the positive ones...**

I don't want to settle any old scores. Yes, I also knew the next generation, Robert Daudelin,<sup>33</sup> Eva Orbanz,<sup>34</sup> Peter Konlechner,<sup>35</sup> Peter Kubelka,<sup>36</sup> Anna-Lena Wibom,<sup>37</sup> and many others; all those I served with in the EC, as you know. There was also Jan De Vaal,<sup>38</sup> he was one of the pioneers. He was very genial but could be quite stubborn at times. He saved a lot of important films: he had the collector's mentality of the first film archivists. I always enjoyed his company, goodness knows. He worked hard for FIAF: sometimes he served as editor of the newsletter, other times as the FIAF Treasurer.

**We were talking about your colleagues of the US, but there is one who is a double national in a certain way, David Francis.<sup>39</sup>**

Oh, yes. David Francis came to FIAF to represent the National Film Archive after Ernest died. We became very good friends and we are pretty close to this day, I would say. Everywhere we met, in any city, David would find a time, sometimes it would be very early morning, to run to the flea market

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33 Robert Daudelin was born in Québec in 1939. A film critic closely associated with the Montreal International Film Festival, he was Director General and Curator at the Cinémathèque Québécoise in Montréal from 1972 to 2002. He was elected Member of the FIAF Executive Committee from 1974 to 1997, Secretary General from 1979 to 1985, and Président from 1989 to 1995. He has been an Honorary Member since 2005, and is Chief Editor of the *Journal of Film Preservation*.

34 Eva Orbanz was born in Berlin. She joined the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek (officially from 1973 to 2007, though continuing today) and was elected Member of the FIAF EC (1981-1995). She served as Vice-President (1987-1989), was elected Secretary General (1989-1995), and President (2003-2009) and a FIAF Honorary Member in 2009.

35 Peter Konlechner was born in 1936. He is the co-founder (in 1964) and co-director, with Peter Kubelka, of the Österreichisches Filmmuseum (from 1964 to 2001). Treasurer of FIAF (1971-1973), member of the EC (1997-2003), he is a FIAF Honorary Member since 2006.

36 Peter Kubelka was born in 1934 in Vienna. Pioneer of the Austrian avant-garde film movement, a leading personality in music, poetry, theatre, and academia, he is the co-founder (in 1964) and co-director with Peter Konlechner of the Österreichisches Filmmuseum (1964-2001). FIAF Honorary Member since 2006.

37 Anna Lena Wibom was Head of the International Relations Department of the Svenska Filminstitutet in Stockholm. She was elected to the FIAF Executive Committee in 1991, and served as FIAF President from 1985 to 1989 and as FIAF Treasurer from 1991 to 1993. She played a major role in the development of the Federation in the 1980s and 1990s.

38 Jan De Vaal (1922-2001), Founder of the Nederlands Filmmuseum (1946). Member of the FIAF Executive Committee (since 1949), successively Vice-Treasurer, Vice-President, Secretary General, Treasurer, and also Editor of the first FIAF Information Bulletin (ancestor of the *Journal of Film Preservation*). Honorary Member since 1988.

39 David Francis was born in London in April 1935. He joined the BFI in 1959 as Television Acquisitions Officer, became Deputy Curator of the National Film Archive in 1963, and left for the BBC in 1965. He returned to the BFI as Archive Curator in 1974, remaining until 1990. In 1990, he joined the Library of Congress (MBRS), and became Chief of the Division (1991-2001). Currently, he works as Research Associate at Indiana University.

and the secondhand bookstores, and I was always trailing along behind him.

When we met recently in Montreal, where we were invited by André Gaudreault to a presentation of his latest book and to talk about Brighton 30 years later, our hosts left us alone the day we arrived and even the next morning, and so we had plenty of time to go on our own and discover bookstores. But, of course, the big work we did together was the Brighton Symposium. David is another person who always has a lot of enthusiasm for discussion about archival matters. In the case of Brighton, which is coming to be a mythological event, he was the organizer of the FIAF Congress for 1978. And, it's funny, he told a story in Montreal that I hadn't heard before. The one reason the Congress was in Brighton instead of London was because David was having problems with his boss at the British Film Institute at the time and David went to Brighton to hold the

Congress in order to avoid interference from him. That was amusing to learn. Anyway, as the Congress was to be held in Brighton, David decided to organize a historical symposium on the filmmakers of the so-called Brighton School. We were talking about it together over lunch, and we decided that it should really be enlarged because the topic was too small. It wasn't international enough, and we decided to open it to films from all over the world during that particular period of the Brighton School, which was 1900 to 1906.<sup>40</sup> It was the very early period, which scarcely anybody had looked at in years. Of course a lot of the films had been unavailable to see. We also decided that what we needed to do was to look at the films that hadn't been seen and couldn't have been seen until the archives started preserving and copying them. When



Robert Daudelin and Eileen Bowser, London 1985.

the archives began to preserve films, understandably, I think, they started with the well-known features. It took a long time to turn our attention to all these unheard-of short films from before the First World War. I agreed to bring the North American scholars together, to hold advance screenings. That is another thing we thought had to be done to improve the historical symposium: we needed to arrange enough time to prepare the discussions. Our team of historians, one European, one North American, were to come together each on our side of the Atlantic, to look at the films, to discuss them together, and do the research and write papers about our discoveries. These turned out to be enormous discoveries for the group of North American film historians, a group I pulled together from such people as I knew were interested in this early history. Just people who perhaps had come to the archive for help, for research.

**Making the archives work together with the scholars was certainly an important contribution to film studies.**

Yes, I felt this was one of the vital things film archives had to do. We were

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<sup>40</sup> For further information, see *Cinema 1900-1906: An Analytical Study. Proceedings of the FIAF Symposium held at Brighton, 1978*. Vols. I and II. FIAF, Brussels, 1982.

preserving those films for a purpose. We had the resources that scholars needed to do their work. We needed the help of scholars to help us make our decisions about acquisition, preservation, cataloguing, and so on. I should say that I did know an interesting group of scholars because of Jay Leyda,<sup>41</sup> the great film historian who was then in his last years teaching graduate courses at New York University. He had been teaching for some years a course on the Biograph films because they existed at MoMA and, to begin with, the early years were in the paper print collection at the Library of Congress. The paper prints had been copied onto film and become available (another factor in the renewed interest in this period), and Jay's students were going through the Biograph films of the Griffith

period, examining them chronologically, and then Jay would assign another year and get the students to work on that year. So, students started to come to MoMA for research. Anyway, that's getting into more detail than we need to, but I just wanted to say that Brighton had its origins in a number of things: one was the presence of Jay Leyda, another was FIAF itself. There was some discussion in FIAF about film history and the archives, and that we should do more about it.

**Who was representing this point of view in FIAF?**

Well, it came from Jacques Ledoux, Raymond Borde, Robert Daudelin, from myself, and from David Francis. I was the organizer of



Eileen Bowser and Wolfgang Klaue in Lausanne, 1981.

the symposium in Montreal, at a FIAF Congress, a couple of years before Brighton, on the methodology of film history, and I must admit that wasn't a terribly successful symposium. My fault. I invited a number of well-known, respected historians to speak about their work and about the methodology they were using, and they really didn't tell us a lot about their methodology, but at least we established the idea that there was international interest in film history, and that it was a matter of teamwork between film historians and film archives and between countries to get these tasks done. So while I organized the Brighton group in New York, David was supposed to organize the Europeans to do the same, but he could not get them together for a session like the one we organized. Nevertheless they did come together for the week before the Congress, and there was a delegation from the group in New York which also went to London to meet with them. And we submitted a lot of films to be seen there. The National Film Archive did a wonderful job of printing up films in their collection. So it was a meeting of the historians and archivists, within FIAF, that brought about a renewal of interest and a total revision of film history in this period. The new movement resulted in Domitor,<sup>42</sup> the international group of scholars

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41 Jay Leyda (1910-1988), avant-garde filmmaker and film historian. He wrote and edited books about Melville, Dickinson, Mussorgsky, and Rachmaninoff, taught at Yale and Toronto during the 1960s and early 1970s, came to New York University in 1973, and held the Chair of Cinema Studies until his death.

42 Domitor was one of the names considered by the Lumière brothers for their first film apparatus.

who are dedicated to this period before the First World War, and it probably influenced also the founding of the Giornate del Cinema Muto. And now there are second-generation scholars involved, because those scholars who were part of the Brighton group all became college professors and trained a new generation of students, and developed new methods and different ideas about film history. Yes, it is one of the projects I'm most proud of having played some part in. In return, the historians of the Brighton Symposium greatly influenced my own work in film history.

**This was certainly an important step, and had something to do with what we are doing in the archives, trying to get scholars and archivists to work together...**

I remember we had a discussion in the EC one day about this need for film history in the archives, and there were people who didn't see why. They were just supposed to preserve films and show them, and let somebody else worry about film history. And so we decided that we would write papers on the topic for discussion at the next Congress in an Open Forum. I was the only who wrote a paper, a one-page statement on the reasons why film history was necessary in the archives. Nobody else did a paper. It seemed that interest in the topic had dropped off, so my paper was finally just distributed in the pigeonholes, and there was no discussion. But later a couple of people from different countries came to me and said: "Thank you for that paper; I used it to influence my authorities." They did; they went home and they said: this is why we need film historians in the archives. I still think it is essential, because I don't see how archivists can do their job without the knowledge of the history of the work that they are preserving and taking care of. And nobody has a better knowledge of the works, is in a better position to know, than people who are, for example, cataloguing films. They have been the ones who studied the facts about the films, the history of the films.

**They can add new fields to what they are describing; they can develop the documentation section...**

Anyway, I know that it is still sometimes not understood in some archives why it is necessary. It's the same idea about film cataloguing: people think you just sit down, look at the film, and just type some data. They don't understand it's a whole intellectual process deciding how to catalogue a film; how to make it most useful and accessible to people. That's all behind cataloguing. And if you don't do a good and interesting catalogue, that film is just a can on the shelf.

**How do you now see the evolution of the archives? There seem to be several points that are critical, partly because of general politics, partly because of technological changes, and partly because there is what some people call a tendency towards the bureaucratization of archives.**

I heard that word used for years about FIAF: "What happened to the old passionate film archivist? Just a bunch of bureaucrats..." I was recently re-reading some of the minutes of the EC meetings. It is true that it often looks like a lot of dry bureaucratic procedures. But it's not. All these hours we spent discussing qualifications for membership. There was a purpose behind that, but it might seem just bureaucratic time-wasting to someone on the outside. There was a real purpose: we were defining ourselves.

**You often hear people say: “Nowadays the directors or curators don’t watch movies anymore.” If you don’t watch movies, you cannot get familiar with the history of cinema.**

I must say I’ve never met anyone actually running the archives who was not a passionate lover of cinema. I really didn’t. There may be some people, but not those I knew, those who actually had the responsibility for the films. And no-one who didn’t long to find more time for film viewing. Me too. Some people didn’t express themselves in the same passionate,

emotional way as Henri Langlois or Jacques Ledoux. Some were more reserved, but that doesn’t mean they hadn’t the same dedication, the same love of cinema and of what they were doing.

**Did you participate in Einar Lauritzen’s *American Film-Index*<sup>43</sup> project? Did you also participate in the index to the Index itself?**

Yes, I contributed some information. The index was the work of Paul Spehr,<sup>44</sup> who should get all credit for that. But when Einar and Gunnar Lundquist were working on the original publication, I gave them help on the history of American companies, and Einar gave me credit for assisting with the English, but not for the real work I did. And he explained to me that was because he didn’t want me to be blamed for the errors that they made, but in fact what I really contributed was some of the history of pioneer companies, some of which were quite obscure.

**It is a fantastic privilege to have a MoMA or a cinematheque nearby...**

I’m lucky to live in New York. I’m sure that New York is one of the great film-viewing cities in the world. They used to say Paris. I think New York, because we have all these non-for-profit-type cinemas, in addition to the art cinemas. Not so many art cinemas now, but places like MoMA, Film Forum, the Walter Reade Theater, BAM, the Museum of the Moving Image, and others, the various film festivals. I am fortunate in

being always welcomed at MoMA. I still feel part of things there. People ask me if I’ve seen any good films lately. It is sometimes difficult for me to tell them which of the current films, but I have a wide choice of fascinating films to see: the New York Film Festival, New Directors and New Cinema, and then I go to Pordenone, of course, and revisit the silent film.

How do you now see the evolution of the film-watching experience? Today people are probably seeing many more films than in the past, but they are not in the original formats anymore. For that you have to go either to the cinematheques or to the film festivals. I love my DVDs and I have a small collection. But it’s a study collection. I think one of the first DVDs I bought was a set of Marx Brothers films, including one of the greatest, *Duck Soup*. This film is marvelous, but I couldn’t laugh all by myself. I was very disappointed that I couldn’t laugh. I noticed that with the slapstick films.

43 Einar Lauritzen and Gunnar Lundqvist, eds. *The American Film Index, 1908-1915 and The American Film Index, 1916-1920*.

44 Paul Spehr, former Assistant Chief of the Motion Picture Division of the Library of Congress, film historian, and author of *The Man Who Made Movies: W.K.L. Dickson*, John Libbey, 2008.



Jacques Ledoux and Eileen Bowser in Lausanne, 1981.

We did an educational course at MoMA last year, where I taught one of the classes. It only takes one person in the auditorium to start a laugh. Maybe he laughs at stupid things, but it's fantastic how it starts everybody else's. Nevertheless, if I'm writing about a film, it's wonderful to be able to go to the DVD and refresh my memory about something.

**Now the festivals show films in digital format with very high resolution; they show restorations – for instance *Quai des brumes*, or *The Red Shoes*, or Jacques Tati's films.**

It's a pity, because people's eyes get used to what they are looking at. You know, a trained eye to appreciate works of art comes from looking at them. If you've never seen a nitrate film on the screen and there is no nitrate print, then you don't have any way of judging what you're missing. Generations of people only know the television version and the DVD set at home.

**And maybe even they are watching films on a screen on a wristwatch, or on a camera-phone...**

That I cannot quite imagine. It is a great pity, but of course there are practical reasons: not everybody lives in a city like New York, for one thing. When people from out of town ask me what is interesting to see I have to tell them about films that will never reach their town. It is very expensive for a family to go to a movie, and drive the car and park it, or get baby-sitters when they are leaving the kids at home. The DVD is useful for family viewing at home. However, a lot is missing. I always believed that it is imperative that part of FIAF's mission be the preservation of the viewing experience.

**This is also a problem, to see that we have very good technicians in many archives. But what are they actually restoring? Who chooses what they have to restore? I think that the original experience had already changed when we started copying films to 16mm for study purposes...**

Yes, I really regret that a lot, but 16mm was much cheaper. We never preserved a 35mm film in 16mm, the master materials are always in the same gauge as the original, but the prints we were making available were often 16mm check prints for the quality of the lab work. We could make more films available for viewing. MoMA has long since that time (chiefly in the 1970s) made its projection prints in the same gauge as the original. The purist approach is often condemned today as being elitist, but I think of it as a search for the highest quality we can obtain. It's idealistic, but you won't reach the highest quality if you don't strive for the best.

**Anyway, film has been struggling its way through comparison with other fine arts, like painting, sculpture, literature, etc.**

I think a comparison with music is the clearest. With the high-fidelity recordings, great music and great sounds are available to everybody. But still there are concerts and orchestras. And there are live performances still going on, and still offering something that is very much treasured.

**How do you see this evolution? What will the mission of the film archives be? What will be our task in the future?**

I'm not a very good forecaster. I just think that the obvious goals are perfectly legitimate goals. And we come together as archivists because there is so much expertise that we can share, so much knowledge about

what we're doing, that we can have a multiplicity of goals in what our particular archives are doing. I don't expect every member of FIAF to be devoted to films as art, even though that was and is the goal of the Museum of Modern Art. I think there's room for all; there is room for the DVD at home, and for the big screen and the audience. What I'm rather worried about, of course, is that the audiences are beginning to see only the DVD, the digital version, and they don't know what the original should look like, so they don't know what they're missing. One of FIAF's missions is to see that this kind of experience stays alive.

**There has been another important, not very well-known phenomenon that has also affected the perception of movies in earlier times: the light source is different. We passed from the voltaic arc to Xenon lamps. The quality of light has also changed, in a very precise aesthetic sense...**

We don't have nickelodeons anymore. No, of course, it is ridiculous to think we can really recapture the past, but nevertheless there are parts of it we can, and that are worthwhile, because the past is *part* of us. The more we know and understand our past, the more we can understand ourselves.

**In this sense, the ultimate aim for the archivists is to know their collections, what they keep, and the history of their collections.**

One important goal for film archives today is to complete their catalogues. The lost films aren't in the attics or in the basements anymore. They are on the shelves in the archives, but nobody knows they're there.

**I often have to smile when I'm told: "We have discovered a fantastic film." "Where did you find it?" "In the archive..." And I remember Gabrielle Claes<sup>45</sup> once mentioning that in every archive there is an important part of the collections we are keeping, about which we don't have a clue. Gabrielle was pointing at the fact that a large part of our collections are like an unknown continent.**

I have had very pleasant experiences in recent years, since I have retired (now almost 17 years ago). In my time I was active in collecting the American silent slapstick films which were scattered all over the world. I acquired many of these films in the last stages of the decomposing or shrunken nitrate. We couldn't project them on a screen, but in the years since I retired the films have been copied and can be seen. Now there is a small group of dedicated enthusiasts for the silent slapstick films, including Steve Massa, who attended the Slapstick Symposium at MoMA as a young man, now at the Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, and Ben Model, who has long been providing music for silent films at MoMA and a lot of other places. They are both great experts, and MoMA arranged for them to see every slapstick film, every possible comedy short film MoMA has, and they have done an excellent job identifying the ones which only had foreign titles or no titles. They made discoveries and they pushed MoMA to show them. There were public showings this year, and they are hoping to do more in the future. And to me it gives a justification for work I

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45 Gabrielle Claes was born in Brussels. She works at the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique, where she succeeded Jacques Ledoux as Curator of the Film Archive and the Museum in 1989. Elected FIAF EC Member (from 1995 to 1999), she served as Head of the Programming and Access to Collections Commission. She was President of the Association des Cinémathèques Européennes (1998-2004) and has been a member of its Executive Committee since 2004.

did back then that these films are now being pulled out of the archives into the light of day. I'm so happy to see that those films are being discovered and seen by our audiences.

**The first FIAF Summer School<sup>46</sup> started in 1973. This means that they had probably been talking and preparing it a couple of years before.**

Oh yes, there was very much discussion of training, since there were no schools teaching film archiving in those days. We had to hire people and train them afterward. The FIAF Summer School was a great help for us. My assistant, Jon Gartenberg,<sup>47</sup> at that time new in that position, attended the first or perhaps the second one. Our dear friend Jonathan Dennis<sup>48</sup> from New Zealand, who died too young, was at that Summer School, I think. I know that Ray Edmondson<sup>49</sup> was at the same one with Jon Gartenberg. Aside from the skills learned, it built valuable relationships between colleagues.

Now, fortunately, there are several training programs. I know that students at the Selznick School in Rochester are very well trained for working in an archive; they are at George Eastman House, and I think it is essential that such courses take place within the film archives. After I retired I taught a first course in film archiving at New York University. I think they wanted to try it out. Now they have a degree program, but at the time I found it a handicap that I was no longer working in an archive, in order to try to teach the practical side, with hands-on experience.

**Which was the last FIAF Congress you have attended?**

My last Congress was Montevideo. I went to all the Congresses until the time I retired, which would have been January 1993. Except for Lisbon. I missed that one because I fell on the way to the airport and broke my arm.

**Composing programs, choosing films, preserving, making choices, has become a demanding and creative activity. You have been admirably active, and the many people who have known you can be considered privileged.**

When you think about how it was pure chance, the way that I got into the field to begin with. And that I knew nothing and could learn everything in the course of my work.... It started as a hobby, indeed. The years I saw in FIAF were the real start of film archiving becoming a serious profession.

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46 The FIAF Summer School was created in 1973 in Berlin (East), at the initiative of the Staatliches Filmarchiv der DDR.

47 Jon Gartenberg was Assistant Curator at the Museum of Modern Art Department of Film from 1973 to 1991, and member of the FIAF Cataloguing Commission from 1982 to 1991. He is currently Director of Gartenberg Media Ltd in New York, USA.

48 Jonathan Dennis (1954-2002) was founder of the New Zealand Film Archive, and its first Director (1981-1990).

49 Ray Edmondson was born in 1943. He joined the Film Section of the National Library of Australia in 1968. In 1978 he became Director of the Library's Film Section. He served as Deputy Director of the National Film and Sound Archive from 1984 until 2001, when he was endowed as Honorary Curator Emeritus. Author of *A Philosophy of Film Archiving*, UNESCO. Currently Director of Archives Associates RTY Ltd in Kambah, Australia.