



Lady in the Dark: Iris Barry and the Art of Film

Robert Sitton

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Iris Barry (1895–1969) was a pivotal modern figure and one of the first intellectuals to treat film as an art form, appreciating its far-reaching, transformative power. Although she had the bearing of an aristocrat, she was the self-educated daughter of a brass founder and a palm-reader from the Isle of Man. An aspiring poet, Barry attracted the attention of Ezra Pound and joined a demimonde of Bloomsbury figures, including Ford Maddox Ford, T. S. Eliot, Arthur Waley, Edith Sitwell, and William Butler Yeats. She fell in love with Pound's eccentric fellow Vorticist, Wyndham Lewis, and had two children by him.

In London, Barry pursued a career as a novelist, biographer, and critic of motion pictures. In America, she joined the modernist Askew Salon, where she met Alfred Barr, director of the new Museum of Modern Art. There she founded the museum's film department and became its first curator, assuring film's critical legitimacy. She convinced powerful Hollywood figures to submit their work for exhibition, creating a new respect for film and prompting the founding of the International Federation of Film Archives.

Barry continued to augment MoMA's film library until World War II, when she joined the Office of Strategic Services to develop pro-American films with Orson Welles, Walt Disney, John Huston, and Frank Capra. Yet despite her patriotic efforts, Barry's "foreignness" and association with such filmmakers as Luis Buñuel made her the target of an anticommunist witch hunt. She eventually left for France and died in obscurity. Drawing on letters, memorabilia, and other documentary sources, Robert Sitton reconstructs Barry's phenomenal life and work while recasting the political involvement of artistic institutions in the twentieth century.

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