

Delia ENYEDI

The Comet Tail: Celestial Apocalypse in Silent Cinema

Abstract: The social disquiet associated with the 1910 apparition of Halley's Comet echoed extensively in the field of cinema. Whether in a highly dramatic or a sharply parodic approach, a variety of silent films envisioned the aftermath of the collision of a comet with the Earth. The present paper proves the early cinematographic interest in this subject by providing an overview of significant screenplays with emphasis on the apocalyptic scenario depicted in August Blom's 1916 science fiction drama *Verdens Undergang* (*The End of the World/The Flaming Sword*).

Keywords: silent cinema, Halley's Comet, celestial apocalypse, *Verdens Undergang*.

Out of an estimated 150.000 films produced during the silent period, no more than 20.000 to 25.000 are known to have survived (Pearson 11-12). A quantitative method of researching early cinema seems to be favoured against the attempt to render aesthetic verdicts as an even smaller number are in a full-length form. A shift in theoretical perspective has developed during the last decades as Tom Gunning, André Gaudreault and Yuri Tsivian brought into discussion the fundamental need to analyse aspects of reception and perception alongside content. Within the collateral aspects that have shaped the understanding of the silent cinema industry, the present paper places its approach at the opposite corner as it follows the pre-production influence of a major social event, namely a comet apparition. By discussing several silent film screenplays, I will demonstrate that the appeal of cinema for apocalyptic scenarios has been almost as old as the medium and that during the silent era, as far as the subject of celestial colli-

Delia Enyedi

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca
E-mail: delia.enyedi@ubbcluj.ro

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pp. 47-53

sion was concerned, comedy surprisingly prevailed over drama.

The World's First International Media Event

The greatest comet in popular knowledge owes its contemporary fame to the extensively media exploitation of its 1910 reappearance. Despite Edmond Halley's demystification as early as 1705 (Lang and Whitney 240), the comet named after the English astronomer owes its large-scale attention for different reasons which remain to this day a subject for debate, an unresolved dispute between reason and superstition. All of them find support in the grandiose visual performance that has fractured the everyday order as the dust particles of a comet placed between Earth and the Sun become anomalously brilliant resulting in magnitude and tail length observable even during daylight (Seargent 31-33). They remain visible for days, weeks or even months.

Beyond the "unusually long and abnormally intense" (Seargent 32) dust tail of Halley's Comet apparition on May 19, 1910, the explanation of the extreme social response lays in several economic aspects. The growth of printed media exposed the citizens to newspaper and periodical articles presenting scientific aspects of what was about to be witnessed or tips in order to fully benefit from the visual experience. The sales of telescopes and binoculars increased dramatically and the advertising market quickly associated the image of the comet with various products from soap, coffee or per-

fume to corsets and furniture (Burnham 183). Last but not least, it was for the first time that the outburst of flame in the sky could be captured by means of photography and passed as a visual heritage to the next generations.

Coincidental apparitions of Halley's Comet during such events as the 1066 Battle of Hastings and the 1456 conquest of Constantinople by the Turkish enhanced its role of evil omen (Lang and Whitney 240). The comet as an omen foretelling various disasters that would change the order of things on Earth has been surprisingly passed onto modern times. The funeral of King Edward VII of England scheduled on the very day of the 1910 apparition only added to the list of fatidic references. That year, the media and the advertising walked along the path of propagating panic. American comet-hunter and astronomer E. E. Barnard announced there was reason to hope the comet would have "plenty of tail to reach to Earth" (Burnham 184). Despite the astronomers reassuring the public that there was no actual threat, reports of a deadly gas contained in the tail of the comet caused mass hysteria. Newspapers rushed to publish diverse opinions. Science fiction writer Camille Flammarion was quoted stating that the cyanogen could infiltrate the atmosphere of Earth and destroy all life forms. The public reaction reached the limits as some people sealed the chimneys, windows and doors of their houses, while others confessed to their crimes or even committed suicide. With merchants benefiting

from selling comet pills and oxygen bottles, church services were held for large crowds (Faure and Mensing 437). The 1910 apparition of Halley's Comet amidst the outburst of the media and advertising industry truly transformed it into "the world's first international media event" (Burnham 183) and the emerging cinema took notice.

Humour over Fear

With the compulsory threat to the existence of humankind as the central element around which the screenplays revolve, apocalyptic films can be classified into seven categories: Religious or Supernatural; Celestial Collision; Solar or Orbital Disruption; Nuclear War and Radioactive Fallout; Germ Warfare or Pestilence; Alien Device or Invasion; Scientific Miscalculation (Mitchell xi). This film, considered to be the first to depict the end of the world, falls into the second category and was actually rushed into production in order to benefit from the frenzy caused by the expected 1910 apparition of Halley's Comet.

A copy of the 11 minutes silent film entitled simply *The Comet* (1910) can be found at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. unfortunately lacking the main title. Consequently, while we know it was produced by the Edison Manufacturing Company and featured Anna Held, the star of the Ziegfeld Follies, sadly the name of the director has remained unknown. A complex display of special effects carries the storyline constructed around the idea of a mass de-

struction caused by a comet scraping past Earth. Large scale explosions, farms, cottages, railway stations, mansions and entire forests bursting into flame kindled the silver screen for the first time. The striking image of an elderly miser clutching to his coins melting in the glaring light of the comet inserts the individual despair within scenes of panicked population blocking entire roads in an attempt to find shelter in the countryside. For the ones taking refuge in the caves, the passing of the comet leaves little hope behind, as the complete devastation of the surface of the Earth is captured in a final panoramic scene.

With no such real outcome related to the passing of Halley's Comet, the tension immediately discharged in several comedies, some launched the very same year. The synopsis of *The Comet/Frightened by the Comet* (1910) indicates a reversed treatment of the previously screened subject as a scientist is denounced for predicting a comet disaster that never happened (Johnston 63). The British equivalent short silent film *How Scrogging's Found the Comet* (1910) directed by David Aylott performs the same error on an amateur astronomer, played by Charles Bolton, who buys a telescope only to find out that the comet he had discovered using it was a mere boy's rocket (Johnston 63).

The next year, the most important woman film director of the early 20th century found the comet apparition a perfect background for one of her funniest cross-dressing films. Alice Guy-Blaché released

Cupid and the Comet (1911) in the United States under The Solax Company that she co-owned and included the largest pre-Hollywood studio in America. In this comedy the telescope inquiring the skies for a great apparition on the big night of Halley's Comet unveils to the owner his daughter's forbidden romance. In an attempt to break the young couple apart, the father banishes her to bed and takes her clothes away. However, they manage to elope and end up in front of a priest who refuses to marry two young boys. The woman ultimately reveals her identity and the ceremony takes place with her father arriving dressed in her maiden clothes (Mahar 50). While not an apocalyptic film *per se*, Guy's approach proves by its secondary use of the 1910 comet fluster the valuable resource of balancing anxiety discharge the cinema represented.

A cinematic adaptation of Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *The Poison Belt* directed by William Bertram opened up the possibility of mocking the rumours regarding fatal toxic gases. *The Comet's Comeback* (1916) featured actors Carol Holloway, Virginia Kirtley and Richard Rosson in a parody mocking people's obsession with speed that affected the quality of their lives. The screenplay describes how a gas contained in the comet tail that once spread in the atmosphere would force everyone to live in slow-moving. Professor Peedeeque (PDQ = pretty damn quick!) retreats to his laboratory together with his daughter and her two suitors. When the oxygen reserves diminish,

one of them by the name Fuller Speed, as his passion was exceeding speed limits with his automobile, is ejected by an airlock. As he waves goodbye while drifting away, the others realize they will sooner or later share the same path.

As late as 1925 the romantic comedy directed by James Cruze continued the series of celestial apocalyptic films of the silent period. In *Waking Up the Town* (1925) Mary (Norma Shearer), the granddaughter of an auto repair shop, falls in love with Jack (Jack Pickford), an idealistic employee struggling to finance his dream of harnessing the power of Rainbow Falls. The futility of his effort becomes clear when old grandpa Abner Hope (Alec B. Francis), an amateur astronomer during his free time from the shop, discovers that Earth is being pulled off his orbit and in about eighteen months it will collide to the moon. A decade and a half after passing, the Halley's Comet based screenplay formula still proved its appeal.

The Sword of Justice

The restoration conducted by the Danish Film Institute ninety years after the release of *Verdens Undergang* (*The End of the World/The Flaming Sword*) rewarded the public with a rare cinematic experience as the 1916 science fiction drama directed by August Blom stands in the field of silent cinema as the only feature-film screenplay on the subject of a comet passing by Earth. Narrative similarities between Blom's film and the 1931 sound film *La Fin du monde* (*The End of the World*) could indicate a common inspira-

tion as director Abel Gance credited the 1894 science fiction novel *La Fin du monde* (*The End of the World/Omega: The Last Days of the Earth*) by Camille Flammarion with inspiring his version.

The alternative English translation of the film, *The Flaming Sword*, discloses a more profound perspective upon the immixture of the celestial body in the serene life of a small mining town as a manichaeistic approach is woven early on into the story development. Two sisters, Dina (Ebba Thomsen) and Edith (Johanne Fritz-Petersen), daughters of the mine owner West (Carl Lauritzen), challenge in opposite ways the odds of romantic adventures. While the latter remains faithful to a childhood friend named Reymers (Alf Blütecher), the first falls for the promise of a wealthy life alongside miner owner Frank Stoll (Olaf Fønss) with whom she elopes, abandoning her engagement to worker Flint (Thorleif Lund). Stoll sets his central role in the narrative by means of his extended financial power that allows him to take control over the stock market as the rumors of an imminent disaster caused by the passing of a comet emerge in the newspapers. With insights on the real situation, as the scientist who discovered the celestial threat is his cousin, he orders the release of fake reassuring news, promising the newspaper editor a significant amount of money resulting from the complete sale of stocks.

An intricate figure of a wandering prophet (Frederik Jacobsen) functions as a balancing element within the story. By his arriving in the mining town as the

very first scene of the film, the events are being clearly shaped by a religious approach as the comet becomes "God's punishment". On night of the comet, opposite reactions divide the population of the town with the poor praying on a hill and the rich defying the destructive powers at a lavish feast held by Stoll. The rebellious Flint seeks revenge for his stolen love and stops the celebrations while the comet unleashes its incredible force. Just as all of the characters that have chosen to break the Christian laws, he will find his tragic end alongside Stoll and his wife, whom he follows to their mine refuge, by now saturated with poisonous gas.

A hopeful sun illuminates the ash-strewn blasted land as Edith, rescued by the prophet, rings the bell surrounded by the ruins of the church while Reymers approaches, saved miraculously from his mission on sea. With the two kneeling, the caption concludes simply "A man and a woman" suggesting a new beginning as the one set in front of the primordial couple. The ending celebrates the hopeful, yet absurd, screenplay formula favoured by most apocalyptic scenarios in which the chances of survival favour the chosen, surpassing the seemingly indestructible forces leading to human extinction.

From a technical point of view, *Verdens Undergang* stands among the first films introducing a new, at the time, technique in lighting, namely the enhancing dramatic effect of a protagonist struggling in the dark with a hand-held source of light (Cherchi-Usai 154), in this case a candle. Otherwise it offers little reward as ev-

ery scene is captured from a single camera with minimum horizontal shifting. However, the excellently handled on location shootings, illustrating the ocean rising and the heavy winds sweeping the devastated houses, compensate together with the display of fire sparks falling onto a small size replica of the town that efficiently activate the challenging destruction sequence.

August Blom's masterpiece declines the previously employed insertions of the comet within the screenplay as reason for cinematic parade, parodic resource or background function. With its approach graphically marked in most scenes, the celestial object is invested with an active role in the narrative as it deals out Christian justice on a land plagued by sin. Lust, betrayal, deceit and vengeance are all punished by death as three symbolic characters, the prophet and a couple of innocent lovers, are chosen to rebuild a new world. The development of War World I might have contributed to the apocalyptic approach of screenwriter Otto Rung in this search for a higher reason standing beyond the downfall of mankind.

Comments on Comets

The selection of films discussed in this paper does not have the ambition of covering all the comet related silent cinema production. Instead it offers valuable insight into the impact of the first media covered end of the world prediction on the possibilities of the challenging new medium of visual communication. The

analysis of the narrative discourse conducts to conclusions regarding the role of the celestial collision silent films within the history of apocalyptic cinema.

The reappearance of Halley's Comet in 1910 sets the year as a landmark in cinema with the first apocalyptic film being produced and launched. *The Comet* enabled for the first time a transfer of the imagery associated with the extinction of mankind into moving images. The technical aspects weighted heavily on the audience's enthusiastic response and therefore profit. Although the non-narrative cinema of attractions (Gunning 230) had already ended a few years earlier, the subject itself provided a brief extension of this exhibitionist period of the silent cinema. In doing so, it initiated a tradition of visual effects display superimposed on a narrative functioning on a secondary level, bringing forth protagonists functioning as mere pawns in a life-and-death game between nature and humanity. The perfection of CGI and 3D technique, generating hypothetical apocalyptic scenarios only to provide conditions of being employed, have proved the resilience of the formula in the movie industry.

Balancing the tension surrounding the first apocalyptic film, the series of short silent comedies dealing with the apparition of a comet surprisingly outnumbered the dramatic productions. With stories using it as collateral information or immersing the characters in the development of the celestial event, apocalyptic silent comedies anticipated a tendency that also hasn't been altered dramatically.

The decades to come, the discharge of social tension from the beginning of the century converted into scientific awareness and, although lacking official data, we can identify an increasingly relaxed cinematic response towards the end of the world scenarios, in both type of narrative and audience reception.

Apocalyptic cinema owes the silent period the setting of foundations for the

genre together with a narrative type of structure favouring the pre-eminence of the special effects. But, at the same time, the particular case of August Blom's *Verdens Undergang*, by casting the comet as central character with a reason of its own, stands as the valuable legacy of the period as it represents one of the most intriguing apocalyptic screenwriting resolutions in film history.

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