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Silent Film Never Gets Old: *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto 2016*

When summer is over and festivals such as Cannes, Venice and Bologna have shown their treasures, silent film lovers long for one last ray of sunshine (or 35mm projector light) before winter moves in. At the film festival *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto*, the first week of October is dedicated to making rare archival treasures of the silent film era accessible to a broader audience. Unlike the festival *Il Cinema Ritrovato* in Bologna, which has similar focuses on archival and restored films, the festival of the Cineteca de Friuli limits its program to silent film only. The 35th edition of the festival took place, as usual, in Pordenone, a small town in northern Italy. Visiting the festival for the first time, I prepared for a demanding week filled with silent cinema gems from around the world – and I was not disappointed.

A fresh breeze was blowing into this year's edition, partly due to the unusual crisp weather and artistic director Jay Weissberg's first time programming. Weissberg's young charismatic style of presenting together with David

Robinson's rather modest presence during panels and occasional inputs resulted in a smooth handover and additionally a very rich programme. Among the impressive rarities that were shown was the newly restored *Behind the Door* (1919) by Irvin V. Willat. Known for its brutal imagery and setting and compelling story, the film is hard to forget, not only because of its violence towards women, but also due to the way violence is depicted both on and off screen. When only suggested, the violence is still disturbingly present. Likewise, the meticulous work done by Camille Blot-Wellens, independent researcher at the Svenska

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Filminstitutet (Swedish Film Institute) in identifying orphan films deserves a mention. For anyone interested in this kind of research, I suggest attending the FIAF summer school in Bologna where Blot-Wellens provides instruction in film identification. This includes analyzing single images, such as looking for text within the frame and linking them to historical sites.

Of course, the comedic parts of the programme also deserve a mention, whether it is the John H. Collins selection, which included his very balanced film *Blue Jeans* (1917) or the Al Christie selection with its highlight *Saving Sister Susie* (1921) by Scott Sidney with Dorothy Devore in the leading role. The US-series *Who's Guilty?*, produced by Pathé was a good reason to start the day at 9am as the series was considered lost for a very long time. Composed of short films of around 10 to 30 minutes, the episodes are based on a relatively simple plot that reveals a twist and a dramatic ending. Initially two-reelers, the series produced in 1915-1916 was retrieved recently from surviving elements of the Gosfilmofond in Moscow. There are still several episodes missing; hopefully we will see those at a future edition of *Le Giornate Del Cinema Muto*.

For the screenings of the so-called special events, the week offered films that nowadays might be considered "blockbusters". The opening night eased the audience in on the festival by a combination of Jean Vigo's *À propos de Nice* (1930), *Z dziedziny sportu strażackiego* (1930), and Fred Niblos' *The Mysterious Lady* (1928), starring a young Greta Garbo. The first one proposes a view over the Mediterranean city, emphasizing architecture and nature as well as varieties of people living in the shown spaces. Although a focus on luxury and *savoir vivre* is predominant, the film turns into a juxtaposition of different ways of life, enhanced by the serial line-up of the single elements and Vigo's good eye for detail. The urban atmosphere pulses and is pushed towards the audience through an accelerating and confident rhythm of editing. Retrospectively, it even seemed to build a first starting position for the programme of *The Other City Symphonies*, which nicely linked the opening event to the later programme of the week.

A perfect match to the high society world of Nice, was Greta Garbo's glow in her role as Russian spy Tania Fedorova in the MGM-Production *The Mysterious Lady*. Announced as the film that "crystallized the 'Garbo-face'", as Mark A. Vieira states in the festival catalogue, high expectations surrounded this projection. Last but not least, the cinematic technique and the panchromatic black and white film stock that contributed to the soft focus of Garbo's complexion complemented perfectly the high quality of cinematography. Another blockbuster, *Monte Cristo*, was also programmed as a mid-week special event. The French production from 1929, directed by Henri Frescourt, succeeded last years' *Les Misérables* (1925), directed by the same Frescourt, which was reportedly longer and more difficult to digest. *Monte Cristo* was restored in 2006 from a French print retrieved from the Russian Archive Gosfilmofond and a Dutch print (rescued by the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek). Projecting the film from

a DCP put a spotlight on the screening policy at the festival, especially as the film was screened in such a format at a niche festival for originally analogue films. The 218-minute version shown on Wednesday evening was interrupted by a short break, that for sure wasn't reason enough to explain the tireless enthusiasm and energy of pianist Donald Sosin and percussionist Frank Bockius, who delivered an absolutely stunning performance. The ensemble definitely has to be counted as the third star of the event, along with the captivating and elegant performance of Jean Angelo as Edmond Dantès and Lil Dagover as Mercédés. Raoul Walsh's *Thief of Bagdad* (1924) on Saturday night was clearly the most apt film to close the festival. While the screening was no doubt impressive, the experience was enhanced due to the impressive performance by the Orchestra San Marco di Pordenone and a projected version with brilliant colours. On the whole, these were three very successful and nicely chosen accents during the week.

Apart from the special events, one of the most captivating examples of unknown rarities in the programme would be the already mentioned *The Other City Symphonies*, in which a number of different forays through metropolises of the world were presented. Usually City Symphonies are considered to be represented best by Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin – Symphonie der Grossstadt* (1927) or Dziga Vertov's *Man with A Movie Camera* (1929). In this case, curator Eva Hielscher selected a different set of city symphonies, several of them having been disregarded from the canon and therefore insufficiently explored. Watching *A Symphonia Da Metròpole* (*Symphony of a Metropolis*, directed by Adalberto Kemeny and Rudolpho Rex Lustig, 1929) one might think that this film has been ignored by the canon for good reasons. Arguably it is not a very consistent piece of cinematography, it comprises of a seemingly confusing addition of sequences, showing different parts of the city. At first attempting to re-construct a workday, it then deconstructs itself in bits and pieces, giving reason to think more of a touristic advertisement instead of a city symphony. Nevertheless, *A Symphonia Da Metròpole* remains an interesting manifestation of a genre, as well as the contrasting *Budapest Fùrdöváros* (*Budapest – City of Spas and Cures*, 1935) by István Somkúti and László Kandó, which seemed much more crisp, even though Hungary's capital is seemingly degraded to a Mecca of Spa and Wellness. Meanwhile, *Fukko Teito Shinfoni* (*Symphony of the Rebuilding of the Imperial Metropolis*, 1929, prod./dir. Tokyo shisei chosa kai [Tokyo Institute for Municipal Research]), shows mostly unseen views on a Tokyo that was destroyed by an earthquake in the year 1923, demanding around 68,000 victims. The gap between city symphonies by Ruttmann and Vertov and the films that were shown at the festival seems quite obvious, but the programme illustrated how a festival can put the series to good use in order to shake an already existing canon, one that more than often lays undiscussed in the context of any (academic) discourse.

To broaden the discourses of the films, there schedule favoured discussions with invited guests and panellists who had contributed or had relations to the festival pro-

gramme. These events were aimed at Collegium members, young researchers interested in silent cinema, but also to the public in order to raise points of interest and to spark interaction. One of the invited institutions was the Filmoteka Narodowa (National Film Archive) in Warsaw, which presented a selection of rarities that seem especially precious considering the fact that 95% of Polish silent cinema is considered lost (see catalogue p. 59). An outstanding film in this selection was *Mocny Człowiek* (*A Strong Man*, 1929) by Henryk Szaro. Based on a novel by Stanisław Przybyszewski, the film tells the story of an unsuccessful author, who kills his friend to get hold of his promising manuscript. The book eventually becomes a success, but the initial wrongdoing leads him into a spiral of criminality. Besides the dramatic plot, this film can be considered an absolute masterpiece in terms of acting performance by lead Grigorij Chmara. Even almost 90 years after its first release, his performance translates so powerfully to the audience, that not even a mix up of two film reels during the screening could diminish this work of art. For a good twenty minutes the film ran without subtitles and lacking narrative coherence, but captivated by the actors' mimic, the intense dark atmosphere enunciated by the setting and the unique cinematography, one could effortlessly understand a story inscribed into the scenery, although it wasn't possible to intellectually fill all the lacunae.

Along with the panels, the daily master classes were an exciting way to either get a break from the dark cinema and/or get broader knowledge of the background of film accompaniment. For the fourth time, the festival offered access to teaching lessons given by experienced pianists like Philip C. Carli, Donald Sosin, Gabriel Thibaudeau, Günter Buchwald and Stephen Horne who instructed their younger colleagues Jonathan Best and Meg Morley. The aim of each masterclass was to show how to read the images of a silent film in order to create the most appropriate accompaniment, enhancing the atmosphere and narrative of the images. The classes were opened to anyone interested, bringing a particular kind of actuality to the films: back in the days of the silent cinema era, most of the performances were usually done in an improvised way, and only orchestra parts were scripted beforehand (with exceptions; sometimes the original sheet music existed). The live music accompaniments of different professional musicians (mainly pianists, but sometimes also orchestra – some of the pianists were even able to play several instruments, some of them even at the same time) brought an additional uniqueness and ephemeral quality to those archival rarities. The masterclasses offered a unique opportunity to learn about reading silent film by means of approaches used to a lesser degree in academic environments.

As colourful accents, some German chromolithographic loops of the years 1902-1914 were included in the program, being screened as short previews to some of the longer films. The individual images of these films were painted frame by frame directly on film stock. Then they were glued together, usually to loops of either 30 or 60 frames, leaving the possibility of repeating the images in an endless projection, although for these precise projections it was decided to leave it at 5 loops per film.

Although this technique of painting directly on film displays a very particular materiality, the output of the wet gate scan in 2K still included what is a well-known and persistent problem in restoration/digitisation – the luminescence of the original nitrate carrier is hardly reproducible. During the digitisation project undertaken by the Deutsches Filminstitut in 2015 and carried out at ARRI München, the loops were left in their “original” state as no colours have been changed or shifted. The instability of the images from the broken perforations was eliminated. Another recurring problem, again referring to the debate of analogue vs. digital projections, is the fixed frame rate for the projection, which is set during the digitisation. In this case of such an experimental film form, which originally used to be shown in a playful way during projections, this again is an aspect related to the ethical debate within the debate of film restoration.

Another omnipresent thread throughout the week was that of William Cameron Menzies, the American art director and production designer (1896-1957), fallen partially victim to the common phenomenon of directors and actors being better known than the art directors of films. Especially impressing in a programme that included, among others, *The Thief of Bagdad* and the wonderful *The Garden of Eden* (Lewis Milestone, 1928) was Menzies’ artistic impact that he succeeded to develop during his career, as author James Curtis demonstrated along the presentation of his book *William Cameron Menzies. The Shape of Films to Come* (Pantheon, 2015). Curtis presented plenty of Menzies’ sketches and illustrations on the screen, embedded in historical facts and anecdotes, along the enormous output of artwork breathtakingly visionary and original, influencing filmmakers continuously.

The feeling of being overwhelmed by images was present not only during the talk about Menzies, but throughout the entire week. The collaboration between an immense variety of archives and silent film enthusiasts led to an extremely rich programme which, for a first-timer at this festival, proved to be a slightly exhausting experience. But in the end, festivals like *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto* show that early films don’t lose their relevance, be it due to a timeless subject or ethical and practical questions they raise in regard to their preservation and accessibility.