

LOST FILMS FROM THE SILENT ERA

Timothy Foster

HERE'S a tendency to rhapsodise about the lost world of silent movie going, the prime years of which ran until the late-1920s. How can one imagine those old Roxys and Cameos without conjuring them as *Last Picture Shows* where people learned to yearn, as dime-store dream palaces where adventure and beauty reigned in larger-than-life display? Nostalgia, however, carries us only so far toward understanding the place of these silent classics in contemporary movie culture. Sentimental memories may overlook a fundamental point: popular entertainment is first of all a commercial culture, created and disseminated for private profit. Mainstream distributors are unmindful of the huge dedication that composers still bring to the genre, breathing new life into classic works by directors such as Chaplin, Keaton, Eisenstein and Gance. Instead they regard the screening of silent films as branches of movie commerce – links, however unique and unusual, in a chain of motion-picture production, distribution, and exhibition that encircles the globe.

Most people will not watch silent films as they think of the jumpy movements and melodramatic plots, which is actually not accurate in much early material. There are many silents that are works of art and need to be seen, either accompanied by the traditional keyboard player revamping' on cinema organ or piano, or by a new and original score arranged for orchestra.

The current vogue for silent film screenings accompanied by live music is truly international. Like opera, it can be done in a grand space with sixty-piece orchestra, or in a village hall with an upright piano. In America, old silent cinemas have been restored and there is growing enthusiasm, especially among the young, to discover the classics of the 1920s. In the UK the phenomenon is concentrated in London, focusing on the celebrated achievements of Kevin Brownlow's Photoplay Productions and a few well-known composers, such as Carl Davis and Philip Glass (both of whom are Americans.) For almost a decade, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Channel 4 Television supported Photoplay in print restoration, music commission and live performance at both The Royal Festival Hall and the Barbican – two of London's greatest venues. The revitalised films, combined with new music, were subsequently broadcast on Channel 4 – as were new art house movies from Asia, Europe, North and South America. Sadly, those golden days of enlightenment are long over. Even Sky's Artsworld satellite channel, although dedicated to promoting the arts in all its forms, has not the financial resource to support their return.

By contrast, the Netherlands nurtures live music for silent film. Amsterdam impresarios and regional orchestras frequently promote the genre. Way back in November 1982, Leonid Trauberg (1901–1990) came to Eindhoven to see – for the first time in 53 years – his film *The New Babylon*, accompanied by Shostakovich's music. He told the press it was the happiest day of his life. Trauberg visited the Netherlands again in 1983 and 1984 during which all

surviving pictures he made with co-director Grigori Kozintsev (1904–1973) were screened. The performance proved overwhelming for an established North-Brabant composer, Jo van den Booren. Having enjoyed worldwide success and a Deutsche Gramofon recording with his score to Carl Dreyer's 1928 masterpiece, *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, van den Booren was looking for another silent film with similar qualities. Seeing the illustrious Soviet cinema pioneers Kozinstev and Trauberg's *The Overcoat* (1926) – based on the short story by Gogol – did the trick.

It is not only the enthusiasm of composers and producers such as Carl Davis and Kevin Brownlow that keeps silent films vital and alive, but also the zeal of independent film festival directors and small-time promoters. These dedicated sleuths reveal that misappropriation and negligence have been regular failings of many film companies. *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* was an undisputed product owned by the famous French production company Gaumont Films. However, according to Brownlow, the original Gaumont Company ceased to exist during the last century and a new company, trading under the same name, simply assumed the rights to the Dreyer film.

Unlike books, films result from a corporate effort. Copyright in a book ends 70 years after the author's death, but the law appears somewhat hazier when applied to makers of films: the screenwriter, director and producer. Under British law, the "author" of a film is generally assumed to be the producer, an interpretation that naturally offends writers and directors. The European Union, on the other hand, takes its lead from France, where the primary author of a film is the director while others, including the scriptwriter, can be named as co-authors. Although this practice is applied to more recent productions, where the provenance is known, for many films of the silent era the way has remained open to more imaginative attributions and assertions.

The BFI print of *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* has deteriorated to the extent that is no longer presentable, while the UK rights issue remains cloudy and unresolved. Until there is a friendly' English-subtitled print available, audiences must go elsewhere to enjoy this particular film and music.

Unfortunately, the importance of archiving silent films was not realized until often it was too late and many classic films were either lost for good or survived badly damaged. (See *Contemporary Review*). There are many reasons for this: due to the high cost of film, or because after an initial success, prints were destroyed to save on storage costs. Old prints naturally became worn and on their re-evaluation at the arrival of the talkie era, they were considered worthless. Those silent film companies that did not go out of business frequently found the cost of archiving films was too high.

During the silent era, cellulose nitrate film was used for the majority of films. It is a highly flammable and unstable compound, with a life of between thirty and eighty years. The decomposition of nitrate film cannot be halted, although in the right conditions, it can be slowed. Many years ago Universal Pictures melted down a stash of its silent films in order to salvage the silver

and in 1948 dumped the remainder to free up storage space for its new films. In a scandal of similar proportions, all of Samuel Goldwyn's silent productions were destroyed to save money on insurance premiums. Nowadays we look back in horror, realising that film is an art form, possessing its own history. However, the destruction of art by other artists is nothing new. Due to lack of available space, many frescoes completed in the Early Renaissance were over-painted by in a newer style. Imagine the outcry if the majority of impressionist paintings had been destroyed simply because Cubism had arrived!

Restoring film is quite time consuming, and is best done if the reel is in 35 mm format. Many of the Charlie Chan movies were declared lost, but in 2001 Fox found and restored 24 Charlie Chan films produced by 20th Century Fox – including the legendary lost 1929 film *Behind That Curtain*.

Some films are just overlooked. When James Mason bought and lived in Buster Keaton's old Italian Villa, he found a hidden room that contained reels of Keaton's films. This was a gold mine, as discoveries of old silent films are rare enough and unless properly stored, degrade quickly.

MGM held onto more films than any other company (Although, Disney did a pretty good job), and they were the most thorough of the major studios to transfer everything photographed on nitrate film to safety stock, starting a major project to do this in the late 1960s. The work eventually covered an almost twenty year period, and cost over \$30,000,000. Everything was converted, no matter how obscure, in this worthy mission. Unfortunately, some time between 1967 and 1972, a major vault fire (Vault #7) in Culver City destroyed many of the films that were awaiting restoration.

There have been countless fires at all vaults owned by the major studios – both in the movie industry and in the music industry. Fire sprinklers are not much help as they ruin the materials. Since the 1960s, many new techniques of storage have been implemented, including gas extinguishers that withdraw the oxygen. However, It became so expensive to keep a vault at just the right temperature and humidity that companies began using salt mines, which contain these elements naturally. If the local environment is not compromised, a fire is unlikely. Fox Studio still owns a salt mine in Kansas where they store over one million films.

Although every year newspapers report the rediscovery of a classic, 90 per cent of all the silent films ever made remain listed as 'lost'. But a film does not have to be old to be lost or underplayed. Worse things have happened. Sometimes it has been 'misunderstood'. There are still film companies who undervalue, or simply do not appreciate, the works of art stored in their archives.

In 1930 Dmitry Shostakovich was commissioned to write an original score for the silent film *Odna, (Alone)*, a realistic feature film, and undoubtedly one of the most beautiful pictures ever produced by the Soviet-Russian cinema. *Odna* stars Yelena Kousmina as a very young bright and happy Leningrad teacher. Very much against her will she is told to go to the Altai mountain area, to start a school for the young children of illiterate shepherds. In the Altai the community adores

her but she experiences hostility from both the traditional rulers in the district and the responsible Communist Party representative.

Abducted by a cattle-trader, Kousmina barely survives the Siberian winter and frostbite when she is lost in the snow. Villagers rescue the young woman just in time. She is taken to a hospital in Novosibirsk by a plane but promises the school children to return to continue her work. *Odna* has a tremendous dramatic quality and a rare emotional impact even for a Russian film of that time. Shostakovich's music very much contributes to the film's passionately emotional appeal.

During the 1941 Leningrad siege the Soyuzkino/Lenfilm complex was consumed by fire. Three of the Kozintsev and Trauberg films were completely destroyed along with film scripts, music, studio material and costumes.

In the mid-sixties the Russian State Film Archive Gosfilmofond restored the film using different sources. Apart from a fragment from the last but one act the whole film could be reconstructed in its original form. The sheet music from the missing scenes survived, containing the only music Shostakovich wrote for the 'Theremin' (Termenvox, the earliest electronic musical instrument, from which a humming sound is produced by manipulating a radio frequency).

When *Odna* was shot and Shostakovich had composed his score (for soloists, chorus, large orchestra) Soyuzkino decided to release the film with a sound track. It was to be one of the first Soviet-Russian sound films. Thus the music was recorded and during post-production a few sound effects and monologues, usually coming from loudspeakers, were added. Aesthetically *Odna* largely remained a silent film with a music score and title cards.

English conductor Mark Fitz-Gerald, in partnership with Theodore van Houten and Nic Raine have restored the 1930 score (*Opus 26*) in an initiative of the Dutch Film in Concert Foundation, authorized by the Dmitry Shostakovich Estate and the composer's publishers and supervised by Shostakovich's pupil and biographer, the Polish composer and musicologist Krzysztof Meyer.

Odna certainly had some success during the brief period of its original release. However during the first Five Year Plan it became apparent that the film contained elements of serious criticism, and doubts about the utopian communist state. For instance, the character of the official responsible for sending an inexperienced adolescent to the outskirts of Siberia identifiably represents Krupskaya, Lenin's widow. She is only seen from the rear: the State has no face! *Odna* was not distributed, hardly exported and shelved by the mid-thirties because of its noticeable 'cultural pessimism'.

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