

# AUDIOVISUAL ESSAYS

## *The Phantom Carriage:* A revaluation

Although Victor Sjöström's extraordinary film *The Phantom Carriage* (Körkarlen, 1921) is widely celebrated as one of the major achievements of Swedish silent cinema, it has received very little extended analysis. In its time, the film was extremely famous and was praised by critics in many countries – indeed, Charlie Chaplin called it the greatest film ever made.<sup>1</sup> Film histories and surveys of Swedish cinema (and overviews of Sjöström's work) largely agree on the film's stature and invariably refer to its complex use of flashbacks and its remarkable multiple-exposure special effects, but rarely go further.<sup>2</sup>

Our two-part audiovisual essay argues for a revaluation of Sjöström's achievement in *The Phantom Carriage*. We attempt to bring a critical and interpretative approach to the film's style into conversation with historical accounts of the evolution of film form that are central to recent silent cinema scholarship. Part 1 explores a single sequence in detail, revealing a mastery of editing and of film space which is remarkable for its period. Specifically, we analyse a segment which is in several respects at the heart of the film: it shows the first meeting between the two central characters, David Holm (Victor Sjöström) and Sister Edit (Astrid Holm); it spans the film's exact mid-point; and it is the longest uninterrupted passage to take place in a single setting. We explore ways in which Sjöström's creation

of three-dimensional filmic space – with no hint of frontality – becomes the basis for a reciprocal relationship between spatial naturalism and performance style. Part 2 considers how the rich articulation of action, character and space that Sjöström achieves in collaboration with his cinematographer, Julius Jaenzon, becomes the basis for a mise-en-scène that can take on discrete interpretive force. We also argue that relationships articulated through the detailed decisions in our chosen sequence take on their full resonance within patterns and motifs that develop across the film. The essay complements our chapter on the film in the volume *Silent Features*, edited by Steve Neale (Exeter University Press, 2016).

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### Works cited

- Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson (2002) *Film History: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Forslund, Bengt (1988) *Victor Sjöström: His Life and Work*. New York: Zoetrope.

<sup>1</sup> See Bengt Forslund (1988).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2002: 68).

Watch the audiovisual essay here:

Part 1 <https://vimeo.com/154707928>

Part 2 <https://vimeo.com/156256091>

