

## Review:

### Giornate del Cinema Muto, Pordenone 3 – 10 October 2009

The Pordenone Silent Film Festival (president Livio Jacob; director David Robinson) has been running annually since 1982; this was the 28<sup>th</sup>. For a long time, it was the only silent film festival in the world, and it is still the most important. For eight days in October, silent films are screened, under optimal conditions, for twelve hours (or so) a day in the Teatro Comunale Giuseppe Verdi in Pordenone, Italy, to an audience of enthusiasts drawn from all over the world. Once experienced, the Giornate is addictive. Almost everybody comes back the following year. Currently, the festival attracts around 900 accredited guests a year.

I have been unable to find an account in English of the genesis of the Giornate, and so this – courtesy of Piera Patat of the Cineteca del Friuli – is a very brief summary. The festival arose out of the Cineteca del Friuli, Gemona, and the Cineteca itself arose out of the disastrous Friuli earthquake of May 1976. Both Gemona's cinemas were destroyed in the earthquake, and Piera and Livio Jacob, young cinephiles, set about trying to raise money in order that one, at least, could be rebuilt. Although the money they raised was insufficient for that purpose, it was enough – as their mentor and D.W. Griffith champion Angelo R. Humouda (1937-1994) made them realise – to start a collection of 16 mm silent films. The Cineteca del Friuli was born. In 1981, the Cineteca acquired a large collection of Max Linder films from Buenos Aires. Piero Colussi and Andrea Crozzoli, who ran the film club Cinemazero in Pordenone, suggested that these be screened in a little festival in their cinema. This occurred in September 1982. It was intended as a one-off event, but – to quote the Giornate website – ‘among the less than ten guests from outside the region, there was the dean of Italian film historians, Davide Turconi. As we sat all together at table, he said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, “Fine. Next year we will do Mack Sennett.” And we, quite naturally, concurred.’<sup>1</sup> The festival, organised jointly by the Cineteca del Friuli and Cinemazero, has been running ever since; Davide Turconi was its first director.

For a marvellous account of the ambience of the festival, and the magic of watching silent films under the very best conditions, see Mark Le Fanu's article ‘Le Giornate del Cinema Muto: A Personal Retrospect’, published in *Griffithiana* 71 (2001) on the occasion of the festival's twentieth anniversary. *Griffithiana*, edited by Turconi, was the journal of the Cineteca del Friuli, and an issue in both Italian and English would always be brought out to accompany each Giornate. Unfortunately, it ceased publication just a few years ago due to lack of funding. Le Fanu's article was written at a time when the festival was held in Sacile, some 15 kms to the west of Pordenone, whilst the Teatro Verdi was being completely rebuilt. In fact, the Giornate was based in the Teatro Zancanaro in Sacile for no less than eight years, from 1999 to 2006. Since Sacile is a much smaller town than Pordenone, with only a few hotels, it was necessary for coaches to bus the festival goers to Sacile from the hotels in Pordenone and then back again. But even that inconvenience did not dim the enthusiasm of the guests. The numbers continued to grow.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the Giornate is that each year there has always been a new selection of silent films to show. The range is international: there have been programmes of silent films from China, Japan, Russia (and the USSR), Australia and New Zealand as well as the



*Giornate del Cinema Muto Poster 2009: Mae Murray as the Merry Widow.*

USA and the European countries; seasons devoted to directors, actors, production companies; seasons showing the highlights of individual collections; others the new restorations of individual archives. The festival has shown thousands of silent films over the years, including the complete oeuvre of D.W. Griffith. Almost all of Griffith's 600 plus films have survived, and screening them all lasted from 1997 to 2008. The books published under the general editorship of Paolo Cherchi Usai to accompany these screenings – entitled ‘The Griffith Project’, published jointly by the Giornate and the British Film Institute – run to 12 volumes.

The main areas covered in the 2009 Giornate were ‘Sherlock and Beyond: The British detective in Silent Cinema’, films from the production company Albatros, set up in Paris by Russian émigrés in the 1920s, ‘Rediscoveries and Restorations’ (a feature every year), Early Cinema, and a number of minor threads, including a tribute to the British Silent Film Festival. The one important innovation this year was a section entitled ‘The Canon Revisited’. Unless a film was selected for the opening or closing nights, or was essential to a particular programme, the Giornate has concentrated, until now, on the less well-known silent movies, notably on new discoveries and restorations. Because there have always been new films to screen, it has also been reluctant to show films again. And so someone like myself, who began attending in 1996, had already missed the silent films of Frank Borzage, Henry King and a host of others – very few indeed of which have been re-

shown. The festival has now recognised that there is a younger generation which has a lot of catching up to do, and so this year a few selected 'canonical' silent films were also screened.

It would be impossible to do full justice to the festival, and so what follows is a highly personal (and indeed selective) sketch of what I found of particular interest. All the films had musical accompaniment, in most cases piano. The standard of these was, as always, excellent: it can hardly be doubted that the Giornate attracts the best silent movie accompanists in the world. Similarly, the quality of the prints shown was, as usual, generally very good, especially the Albatros films and, as one would expect, the restorations. Background details on all the films screened – in particular, on the industrial contexts in which they were made – can be found in the biligual (Italian and English) Catalogue for the 2009 festival which is available online at the Giornate website.<sup>2</sup> Any cast, crew and technical details below are from that source.

### Opening night: *The Merry Widow* (Erich von Stroheim, 1925)

The opening and closing night films have an orchestral accompaniment, and the score for *The Merry Widow* was composed by Maud Nelissen. The film is not one of the best Stroheims, but it was undoubtedly enlivened by the score.

In the Balkan principality of Montebianco, ramrod straight John Gilbert as Prince Danilo and a smirking Roy D'Arcy as Crown Prince Mirko battle it out for the favours of American show girl Sally O'Hara (Mae Murray). Stroheim filmed his version of 'the prince and the commoner' no less than four times: *Merry-Go-Round* (co-directed with Rupert Julian, 1923), *The Merry Widow*, *The Wedding March* (1928) and *Queen Kelly* (1928). Particularly if one takes into account the lost second half of *The Wedding March* and the incompletely filmed last part of *Queen Kelly* (the African scenes), there are many links and correspondences across these four films; in effect, all follow the same basic structure, but with individual variations. In order to align *The Merry Widow* with this structure, an extensive first half has been added to Franz Lehár's operetta.

In all four films, the opening events are much the same. In pre-First World War Europe, a more or less dissolute count / prince meets and sets out to seduce the heroine, a working-class girl. She is usually a virgin; Sally alone is coded as sexually experienced. This is registered in the site of her seduction: whereas the virginal heroines are deflowered in, typically, orange- or apple-blossom gardens, Sally is seduced in a brothel. Nevertheless, in all the films, the seduction causes both hero and heroine, but particularly the latter, to become enamoured. However, the hero is obliged – usually, as in *The Merry Widow*, he is told – to marry within his own class. The heroine is abandoned. In *The Merry Widow*, this occurs, most ignominiously, on what was to have been Sally's wedding day. Enraged by Danilo's betrayal, she rends her wedding dress apart in a most dramatic fashion.

It is after this that the films develop in different ways, but all of them involve either the hero or heroine marrying someone else. Where it is the heroine who suffers this fate, as in *The Merry Widow* and *Queen Kelly*, Stroheim clearly relishes the grotesquerie of the liaison: in both cases the marriage partner is played by Tully Marshall at his most repulsive. (Unfortunately, one aspect of this 'repulsiveness' is that in both films he is disabled, and uses canes or crutches. Stroheim's use of disability in his films as both an



*The Merry Widow. The seduction. Prince Danilo (John Gilbert) and Sally O'Hara (Mae Murray) in the brothel.*

image of revulsion and a source of morbid fascination is in itself deeply suspect.) Baron Sadoja (Marshall) in *The Merry Widow* is a leering foot fetishist who repels Sally, but she is prepared to marry him because his financial power within the principality will offer her a means of revenge on Danilo for his betrayal. However, she is saved from Sadoja's embrace when he has a spectacular heart attack on his wedding night – the point at which Sally finally becomes the eponymous widow.

*The Merry Widow* also has more comedy than the other Stroheims in this group, not least in the antics of the two male leads: Mirko repeatedly goads Danilo over Sally; Danilo invariably responds by assaulting him. As in Laurel and Hardy, it's the absolute predictability of these routines which is so funny. Overall, this is probably the least of the four 'the prince and the commoner' films, but even a minor Stroheim is still pretty good.

### Sherlock Holmes and Beyond

I would like to dispense fairly quickly with this section. Quite a number of the films shown were episodes in a series; others were early crime films which included Sherlock Holmes in their titles, but which bore no relationship whatever to Conan Doyle's detective. Nevertheless, some of the peripheral films were entertaining. In the one-reeler *A Canine Sherlock Holmes* (Stuart Kinder, 1912) the detective is an extremely enterprising Jack Russell, which at one point pretends to have been injured in a traffic accident in order to gain access to the suspect's house. *The Sleuth* (Harry Sweet, 1925) demonstrated just how funny Stan Laurel could be even without Hardy. *The Amazing Partnership* (George Ridgwell, 1921) featured a particularly engaging non-nonsense female private detective, played by Gladys Mason.

*The Sign of Four* (Maurice Elvey, 1923), a genuine Sherlock Holmes story with the most famous Holmes interpreter of the era, Eille Norwood, was the best film in this programme. (Elvey was the subject of a Giornate season in 1997.) It is excitingly filmed, with Elvey's usual flair for integrating different strands of narrative. But the National Film and Television Archive print shown had a curious feature. A superb climactic race between Holmes in a speedboat on the Thames and the villains in a car driving



through London was interrupted by footage from an earlier torture scene which had been displaced from its original position in the narrative. This Godardian disruption of the narrative was not, I would have thought, Elvey's doing.

### Albatros

The Albatros films were much more satisfying. Almost all were of interest; a number were rather good. The earliest Albatros film shown, *La Nuit du 11 Septembre* (Dominique Bernard-Deschamps, 1919) is a striking example. Although only surviving in a truncated print (a common fate of many silent movies), it is a remarkable psychological melodrama in which a decent man is somehow 'taken over' by his evil double. It begins on a First World War battlefield with a conscious evocation – through a series of Victor Hugo quotes – of the scene in *Les Misérables* (1862) in which, on the Waterloo battlefield, the wounded Pontmercy mistakes the scavenger Thénardier for his saviour (a mistake whose repercussions echo through Hugo's story). On the battlefield in *La Nuit du 11 Septembre*, the hero Malory (Séverin-Mars) encounters a dying general who asks him to care for his fiancée Sophie (Eugénie Boldireff) and his son. But also on the battlefield is the scavenger Goubine (Paul Vermoyal), likened to a vampire, who tempts Malory into evil. When Malory goes to fulfil his mission, and he sees the money that the general has left in Sophie's care, the shadow of

Goubine behind him suggests that he is now under the influence of this evil Doppelgänger: he strangles Sophie, takes the money and burns down the house. Sophie survives, but loses her reason. With the metaphysical forces unleashed on the battlefield thus leading to 'possession', attempted murder and madness in the older generation, harmony is not restored until the next generation grows up, and Malory's daughter marries the general's son.

The battlefield is a setting with powerful metaphorical associations. In 'Melodrama and the American Cinema' in *Movie 29/30*, referring to the 'battlefield re-encounters' in such films as *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915), *Hearts of the World* (Griffith, 1918) and *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Rex Ingram, 1921), I wrote that 'the "emotional logic" of the films' narratives can be likened to that of a dream, with the battlefield as the terrain of the unconscious' (1982: 11). *La Nuit du 11 Septembre* extends the metaphor. Here the battlefield, still strewn with corpses, has become saturated with 'evil', as though the monstrosity of the mass slaughter has unleashed a general malevolence. But again a link with the unconscious may be drawn: the unconscious as a dark, repressed force. What is released on the battlefield is the hero's id.

Across the Albatros films, two names in particular recurred: the director Viatcheslav (Victor) Tourjansky, and the actor and screenwriter – and in one case co-director –



Ce cochon de Morin. Morin (Nicolas Rimsky) in a characteristic pose: complaining that no-one is paying any attention to him.

Nicolas Rimsky. I'll look at Rimsky first. The films in which he played the lead were all comedies which he also scripted (or co-scripted), effectively turning them into Rimsky vehicles. The film he co-directed (with Roger Lion), an adaptation of famous French stage comedy, *Le Chasseur de Chez Maxim's* (play 1920 / film 1927) was the least interesting. Its plot conceit is that the doorman at Maxim's night club has become so rich from procuring for the wealthy clientele that he has bought a chateau, keeping his family in the dark about the source of his income. Romantic complications then arise when his daughter falls for a particularly racy Maxim's customer. But Rimsky is much more interested in his own character than in his romantic couple, with the result that the film is padded out with Rimsky comedy routines and is ludicrously overlong. *Ce cochon de Morin* (Tourjansky, 1924), from a Guy de Maupassant story, is sharper and more amusing. Here the irritations of Rimsky's narcissistic character are held in check by the likableness of the other players, and when the film shifts into bedroom farce in its second half, this is lively and engaging.

*L'heureuse mort* (Serge Nadejdine, 1924) seemed to me the best of the three. Curiously, the film anticipates, in a comedy vein, Guru Dutt's remarkable melodrama, *Pyaasa* (1957). In *Pyaasa*, the hero Vijay, played by Dutt himself, is unable to find a publisher for his poems. Some way into the film, he is reported killed in a train accident, at which point his poems are published and quickly become very popular. In fact, suffering from shock, Vijay is in a hospital. When a

nurse reads from the book of his poems, he abruptly recovers, but his claim to be Vijay leads to his incarceration in an institution as a madman. Realising that he is more valuable to them dead, a friend and the publisher deny that he is Vijay. The publisher bribes Vijay's corrupt brothers to do likewise. Eventually, Vijay escapes from the institution, and in a stunning sequence interrupts the huge gathering of his fans who have come to commemorate the anniversary of his 'death'.

In *L'heureuse mort*, Titi (Rimsky) is an unsuccessful playwright who, early in the film, is swept overboard whilst on a yacht and believed drowned. As news of this spreads, an impresario realises the commercial potential and chats up Titi's wife, Lucie (Suzanne Bianchetti), with a view to obtaining the rights to Titi's work. Titi arrives home and overhears this conversation – and does not reveal himself to Lucie until the agent has gone. Here, as befits a comedy, it is the hero himself who sets out to capitalise on his 'death'. Although Lucie and a friend know who he really is, to everyone else Titi pretends to be his twin Anselme, who is conveniently in Senegal. In the meantime, with his plays now very popular, he sets about turning out posthumous works.

As in *Pyaasa*, the climactic sequence occurs at a gathering in which the 'dead' artist is being honoured. In *L'heureuse mort*, the occasion is the unveiling of statue to Titi, and it is not he who interrupts the ceremony, but Anselme, who has returned from Senegal – with a Senegalese wife – to expose this impostor who is pretending



La dame masquée. *The masked ball.*



to be him. As the twin brothers confront one other, Anselme works out what has happened and continues the pretence by himself claiming to be Titi, returned from the dead.

Those who know *Pyasa* will realise that I have only mentioned one thread in the film; much more is going on. The film is not just about the greed and venality of those who seek to profit from the poet, it also offers a critique – partly through two contrasting female figures – of the class divisions and deprivation in Indian society. In *L'heureuse mort*, nothing much else is going on. Nevertheless, the film is a perfectly enjoyable comedy.

Tourjansky turned out to be a rather more elusive figure than Rimsky. As well as *Ce cochon de Morin*, three other Tourjansky films were shown, and although he was screenwriter as well as director on all of them, each was utterly different from the others. In the 2009 Catalogue, David Robinson describes *La dame masquée* (1924) as 'one of the darkest and most misanthropic films in silent cinema' (Surowiec, 2009: 81). It tells the story of a young woman from the country, Hélène (Natalie Kovanko, Tourjansky's wife), who is exploited by corrupt Parisian society: her cousin marries her when he learns – before she does – that she has come into money; her lover turns out to be a heartless gigolo; here Rimsky plays a non-comic Chinese who blackmails and then tries to rape her. Nevertheless, Hélène copes with these various problems with more aplomb than most heroines, and in the background is one benevolent male, her uncle Michel (Nicolas Koline). The extended sequence of the masked ball – which climaxes with a shooting – is excitingly done, and at its best the narrative evokes the twists and turns of a Feuillard serial.

*Le chant de l'amour triomphant* (1923), set in 16<sup>th</sup> century Ferrara, is much more bizarre. Unable to choose between two suitors, Valeria (Kovanko) foolishly asks her mother to decide for her. Her mother chooses Fabio (Rolla Norman) because his character is more like Valeria's; the rejected Muzio (Jean Angelo) leaves for abroad. It is when Muzio returns five years later that the problems begin. He brings with him a mute Hindu (Jean d'Yd) who has psychic powers (another sinister Doppelgänger), and at this point the whole nature of the film changes. Now we have an oneiric narrative, with mysticism, dreams, erotic fantasies, somnambulism, psychic visions and even, it would seem, a resurrection. It's not entirely successful, but it is intriguing.



*Le chant de l'amour triomphant*. Valeria (Natalie Kovanko) experiences an erotic fantasy.

*Le quinzième prélude de Chopin* (1922) was perhaps the best of the Tourjanskys. It begins as a domestic melodrama, and is distinguished by an unusually vivid set of characters. Two suburban households are neighbours: in one, the hero Monet (André Nox), his wife Louise (Novanko), mother and son; in the other, the heroine Jeanne (Mme Joujakoff), her brutal older brother Maurice (Gaston Rieffler) and disabled younger brother Léo (René Hiéronimus). Tensions arise because each household contains a dangerous, disturbing figure: Louise and Maurice, who are in fact secretly lovers. They are also marked as unsympathetic by their hostility to the Chopin prelude which binds the other characters together in various ways. Inevitably, the film can only achieve a happy ending by getting rid of these figures, but this is not achieved in quite the way one might expect. In particular, there is a court case in which Monet is tried for murder, but in which he is found innocent before the actual killer comes forward. This enables a happy ending in which the actual killer – an entirely sympathetic figure – escapes justice.

The biggest star at Albatros was Ivan Mozhukhin (Mosjoukine in his French films). But the Giornate had already devoted a season to him (in 2003), and so on this occasion only one Mosjoukine film was included, *Justice d'abord* (Jacob Protazonoff, 1921), which Mosjoukine also scripted. (In 2003, several Russian Protazonoff / Mozhukhin films were screened.) In *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, Natalia Nussinova points out that the Russian émigrés were gradually obliged to break 'one of the major canons of pre-revolutionary film': 'the obligatory tragic finale, or "Russian ending"' (Nowell-Smith, 1996: 165). Russian audiences wanted unhappy endings just as much as American audiences (so we are told) wanted happy endings. But she also points out that, in France, they did not surrender their Russian endings without a struggle. *Justice d'abord* is a case in point.

The film centres on Granier (Mosjoukine), an 'implacable' public prosecutor, who becomes involved in a series of events which result in him feeling obliged to prosecute – and demand the death penalty for – the woman he loves, Yvonne (Natalie Lissenko). He is ruthless in his prosecution partly because he is convinced, wrongly, that the man Yvonne shot, Gravitch (Tourjansky), was a romantic rival, but also because she never disputes her guilt. Only after Yvonne has been guillotined does Granier



*Justice d'abord*. Granier (Ivan Mozhoukine) and Yvonne (Natalie Lissenko).

discover that her silence was to protect him: she shot Gravitch because he possessed forged papers which would have trapped Granier in a criminal frame-up. The yell of terror Granier lets out when he realises this is a measure of the power Mosjoukine has on screen. The film ends with him sitting in the back of his limousine, a broken man.

The most prestigious Albatros production screened was *Carmen* (Jacques Feyder, 1926). Filmed extensively on location, it often looks superb and has some terrific set pieces, such as a shoot-out between soldiers and smugglers in the mountains which could have graced a first-rate western. Raquel Meller is a spirited Carmen, and the youthful Louis Lerch a surprisingly good Don José. But for all its strengths, at 165 minutes it is simply far too long. After two hours it loses momentum. Luis Buñuel makes a number of appearances in the film as an extra, and I'll swear there is one scene in a tavern in which he has contrived to be in two places at once. If this is so, he must have secretly enjoyed his little coup.

Meller and Lerch were reunited in the short *Nocturne* (Marcel Silver, 1927), a touching little film in which a soldier on leave from the First World War is making his way to an inn in the mountains where the woman he loves, unknown to him, is dying. She in her turn does not know that he is alive. Only 35 minutes long, but beautifully filmed – atmospheric and melancholy.

### Rediscoveries and restorations

*Graziella* (Marcel Vandal, 1925). The 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic poet Alphonse de Lamartine is perhaps not well known outside his native France, but he was sufficiently famous there for a quotation from one of his poems to crop up in another film screened at the Giornate this year, *L'île enchantée*. *Graziella* was adapted from an autobiographical story Lamartine wrote in 1852, and it shows him as an old man looking back at himself as a young bourgeois (Jean Dehelly) on holiday near Naples with a friend. They work for a local fisherman, and thereby meet Graziella (Nina Vanna), the fisherman's granddaughter. A youthful, albeit chaste, romance develops between Lamartine and Graziella. Much of the film was shot at the actual locations in the story, and Vandal went to the trouble of using three different cameramen: 'René Guychard shot the studio interiors in Paris, Maurice Laumann did the dramatic exteriors, while René Moreau, a master *paysagiste*, captured the romantic vistas of land, sea, and sky' (Borger in Surowiec, 2009: 114). All the sequences blend together harmoniously, and the overall result is an affecting evocation of a youthful romance. Antonin Artaud plays Graziella's lovelorn cousin and suitor.

*L'île enchantée* (Henry Roussel, 1926) was one of the highlights of the festival. The island in question is Corsica, and the hero Francesco della Rocca (Rolla Norman) is an outlaw, hiding in the mountains. His crime is that he enacted 'Corsican justice', killing the man who raped his sister. But he's otherwise shown to be an 'honourable man': he cares for the child who resulted from the rape (his sister is dead) and in one scene he interrupts his flight from the police and uses his medical skills to save the life of the police sergeant's sick child.

The heroine Gisèle (Jacqueline Forzane), by contrast, is the daughter of an industrialist, Rault (Jean Garat), who owns a steel works. Rault wants to expand his empire, and this will mean demolishing Francesco's ancestral home, where his grandfather still lives. Gisèle is entirely committed to her father's project – which both speak of in terms of 'progress' – and works for him as an assistant.

The battle lines are thus drawn up between hero and heroine in stark terms. In addition, both are exceptionally strong-willed characters, which enhances both the ideological conflict as well as the passionate romantic relationship which develops between them. It's a very unusual romance, anticipating the clash of hero and heroine in an Ayn Rand novel such as *The Fountainhead* (novel 1943 / film – directed by King Vidor – 1949).

The film seeks to move towards a softening of positions: the heroine will try to prevent her father from destroying Francesco's home; the hero will surrender to the law. But ruthless capitalism is not to be contained. Events climax with Rault fulfilling his threat and dynamiting the della Rocca house – an act which simultaneously blows up Francesco's dog. In a reflex, Francesco shoots Rault, who falls into the river and is swept down to the millrace, where his body is carried round by the wheel.

Inevitably, this destroys the relationship between Francesco and Gisèle, and in a masochistic gesture he surrenders to the police. But another woman has become his ally: ever since he saved the life of her child, the wife of the police sergeant has secretly worked to help him. And here she frees him: imaged as a Madonna figure, she opens the cell door and insists that he flee. Francesco returns to the mountains, where his grandfather and nephew both await him.

Filmed extensively on location, *L'île enchantée* has a powerful, almost mythical sweep. With its heightened clash of characters and elemental feel for the terrain, the film is indeed very like a King Vidor movie. Francesco is also rather like a legendary hero: he and Gisèle first meet when she has a bad fall in the mountains and he sets her fractured arm. Since there, too, the police are pursuing him, he becomes something of a medical Robin Hood figure, helping the sick and injured even as he outwits the law. It is only to be expected that he returns to his outlaw status at the end. But this is at the expense of the romantic relationship. This is not a film about the formation of the couple: as individuals, each is too uncompromising for that to be possible.

A British-German co-production set in Blackpool, *The Three Kings / Ein Mädel und 3 Clowns* (Hans Steinhoff, 1928) was disappointing. Other films Steinhoff made at that time, such as *Angst* (1928), from the same Stefan Zweig story as Roberto Rossellini's *La Paura* (1954), and *Nachtgestalten / The Alley Cat* (1929), are pretty good. In addition, there have been several memorable clown movies shown at the Giornate in recent years: *Klovnen (The Clown)* (Anders W. Sandberg, 1926), with Gösta Ekman, *Rutschbahn / Luna Park / The Whirl of Life* (Richard Eichberg, 1928), with Heinrich George, and *Looping the Loop* (Arthur Robison, 1928), with Werner Krauss. All these actors give excellent clown performances. If one adds to these films *He Who Gets Slapped* (Victor Seastrom, 1924) and *Laugh, Clown, Laugh* (Herbert Brenon, 1927), in both of which Lon Chaney gives a similarly impressive performance as a clown, one can see that 1920s silent cinema was a unusually rich period for clown movies.

In *Ein Mädel und 3 Clowns*, although we do see something of the rest of the circus – in particular, an act involving an astonishing mixture of lions, tigers and polar bears all together in one cage – clowning is pushed firmly into the background. One is tempted to conclude that this is because the actors playing the clowns – Henry Edwards, Warwick Ward and John Hamilton as the brothers Edgar, Frank and Charlie King – simply could not clown convincingly. Instead we have a standard melodrama in

which a young woman, Maria (Evelyn Holt), in flight from a brutal male – the lion tamer Fredo (Clifford McLaglen) – ends up in the care of three brothers who have contrasting responses to her vulnerable attractiveness. The male characters all conform to type: the villain behaves like a villain, ruthless and savage, the womanising brother behaves like a cad, cynical and manipulative, the youngest brother like a callow youth, naïve and emotional, and the hero is predictably slow to grasp that the heroine loves him. Even the climactic use of a backstage fire during a circus performance is relatively routine.

*La vie merveilleuse de Bernadette* (Georges Pallu, 1929) is worth mentioning for the unusual way in which it tells the familiar story. It begins in a contemporary French village, where a schoolgirl Antoinette (Janine Borelli) is paralysed after being caught in a violent storm. As the idea of her going to Lourdes in the hope of a miracle cure is mooted, her godfather Jules (Charles Débert) is sent to Lourdes to investigate the story of Bernadette. There he meets an old woman of 92 who actually knew Bernadette. As she tells Jules Bernadette's story, we go into flashback. From that point on, the film is exactly as we would expect. One minor theological point. Since the expression 'the immaculate conception' is regularly misunderstood, it should be noted that the film shows the ordinary people in Lourdes in 1858 as well educated in such matters. A number of them accompany Bernadette (Alexandra) to the cave where Bernadette has her visions of a lady – whom nobody else can see. When Bernadette tells them that the lady has identified herself by saying 'I am the immaculate conception', they promptly go down on their knees and cross themselves. They know what this means.

Two other restorations were *Die Gezeichneten / Love One Another* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1922) and *The Eagle* (Clarence Brown, 1925), but both are relatively well-known works. Both stood up very well: in *Die Gezeichneten* Dreyer handles an extremely complex narrative with skill and verve; in *The Eagle*, Brown keeps the comedy happily bubbling away, including a scene in which Louise Dresser, with an ecstatic expression on her face, gropes for Valentino's head which she had contrived to place in a most suggestive position.

Finally, a short, *Monkey's Moon* (Kenneth Macpherson, 1929). In the Catalogue, David Robinson describes it as 'a lavishly photographed nocturnal elegy involving two little monkeys in a moonlit garden before the rain, and a jazz musician' (Surowiec, 2009: 127). Only 10 minutes long, and marvellously atmospheric and poetic.

### The Canon Revisited

The films shown here were not in fact obviously 'canonical' works. The selection was international – seven films, each from a different country – but these were not taken from the most famous silent films of that country. Where the director was indeed a canonical figure – e.g. Dreyer – the film chosen, *Du Skal aere din Hustru / The Master of the House* (1925), was one of his less typical works. And in two cases, the films were not well-known at all. I'll look at these first.

*Dom na Trubnoi / The House on Trubnaya Square* (Boris Barnet, 1928). A young peasant woman Parania (Vera Maretskaia) comes from the country to Moscow, and is exploited by a nasty petit bourgeois hairdresser, Golikov (Vladimir Fogel). This melodramatic premise is however here rendered as comedy – or, more accurately, a mixture of satire, burlesque and frenzied screwball – which makes the film highly distinctive. On the one hand, it seems

overwrought and cartoonish; on the other, fast and furious and anarchic, with speeded-up motion, freezes, and wildly exaggerated characters and behaviour. The highlight is a scene in which some workers are staging the storming of the Bastille to a local audience. The actor playing the General turns up too drunk to perform. As the audience becomes more and more restless and noisy, Golikov is persuaded to stand in for him. And so, the villain in the film duly acts a



Dom na Trubnoi. *Parania* (Vera Maretskaia).

villain on stage, shooting a young revolutionary who was standing on the barricades holding up the tricolour. This is too much for Parania, a member of the audience. She marches up on to the stage, belts Golikov into submission with a broom, then seizes the tricolour herself and triumphantly mounts the barricade. The audience goes wild.

*Rotaie* (Mario Camerini, 1929) was another of the highlights of the festival. It has one of the most gripping opening sequences I've seen. Late at night, two young people check into a cheap hotel. They have no luggage. The girl, never named (Käthe von Nagy), carries a letter from her parents condemning the boy Giorgio (Maurizio D'Ancora) as no good; she reads it and cries. He comforts her. But it soon becomes apparent that they have come to commit suicide: Giorgio puts poison in a glass of water.

At this point, a train passing outside shakes the room to such an extent that the glass falls from the side table on to the floor. Only now does Giorgio ask the girl if she was afraid. She was, 'Because I love you'. With virtually no money, they cannot stay in the hotel, and so they slip out, and go to a buffet in the station. The station – a major terminus – is teeming with life, which furthers their sense of dislocation. A second intervention of fate: a man rushing for a train drops his wallet. By the time Giorgio picks it up, the man has caught his train, which is already leaving.

Holding the wallet, filled with money, Giorgio decides that they, too, should catch a train. A long-distance express is about to leave, and by now we are so involved in their situation that we are actually in suspense – can he do this in time? – as he goes to obtain a sleeping compartment from conductors waiting by the train. He succeeds and, in their compartment, the girl asks where they are going. Giorgio: 'Where the others are going'. Then: 'You will not suffer any more, my love'. The train races through the night.

In this opening sequence, two young people are taken from despair to tentative hope. This occurs purely by accident, but it seems much more like destiny: a destiny which moves matters along so quickly that they can barely



comprehend what is happening. *Rotaie* means wheels, and crucial to the sense of destiny is the train as symbol, a symbol of a new beginning. But the atmosphere in the station, too, seems charged with possibilities. Vladimir Nabokov has written of 'that life-quickenning atmosphere of a big railway station where everything is something trembling on the brink of something else' (2001: 418). This describes perfectly the atmosphere Camerini has captured in this brilliant little scene.

The train takes them to another world: the Italian Riviera resort of San Remo. Since they now have money, this seems at first like paradise, but it is, of course, a false paradise. In the casino, Giorgio gambles, wins, but then inevitably loses. Equally inevitably, the girl attracts the attention of a practised seducer, Jacques (Daniele Crespi). But at the moment when Jacques is about to spring his trap on the couple – Giorgio is by now hopelessly in debt to him – he looks at their frightened faces and changes his mind. He lets them go.

They make the return journey – implicitly to the city they left – by third class. Working-class fellow travellers share their food with them. In the next scene, Giorgio is working in a factory. At the end of his shift, the girl meets him outside, and they walk into the future together. She's knitting – presumably a signifier of pregnancy.

In the Catalogue, Sergio Grmek Germani says of this ending that it is 'less social-fascistically inclined than one might imagine' (Surowiec, 2009: 104). I agree. The crucial point about Giorgio is that, throughout the film, he has repeatedly confirmed the girl's parents' initial judgement of him. The heroine herself has stuck by him because she loves

him, but it is nevertheless crucial that he should redeem himself at the end and find work. It's a *personal* redemption.

Although nothing in the rest of the film quite matches the intensity of the opening 15 minutes, *Rotaie* is nevertheless a very fine movie, which deserves to be much more widely known.

*Du Skal aere din Hustru* is one of Dreyer's films that is available on DVD, and the stylistics of the film are discussed in some detail in David Bordwell's *The Films of Carl-Theodor Dreyer*. I have nothing to add here. Other familiar films shown in this section were *Der Golem, wie in der Welt Kam / The Golem* (Paul Wegener, 1920), *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1923) and *J'Accuse* (Abel Gance, 1919) which have also been relatively well-covered in the literature. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that *The Ten Commandments* and *J'Accuse* were both shown in beautiful new colour – tinted and toned – restorations, and that *J'Accuse* looked particularly luminous.

*J'Accuse* is also another film in which the battlefield occurs as the 'site of the repressed'. Here the hero Jean Diaz (Romuald Joubé) returns from the First World War with his mind shattered. In his fevered state, he convinces the people of his village that the dead soldiers from the battlefield have risen up – like revenants – and are coming back to confront them with their profiteering and other vices during the war. And we do indeed see ghostly legions of soldiers making their way from the battlefield through the roads of France. This is the 'return of the repressed' with a vengeance.

The seventh film in this section was *Gunnar Hedes Saga* (Mauritz Stiller, 1923), another restoration. In the



*Gunnar Hedes Saga*. Ingrid (Mary Johnson) cares for the mentally ill Gunnar (Einar Hanson).



Catalogue, Jan Olsson describes it as a second-tier film in the great run of Sjöström / Stiller films of the 'teens and 'twenties in Sweden (Surowiec, 2009: 100). My opinion of the film is far higher than that. Although it is yet another film which has substantial sections missing, *Gunnar Hedes Saga* seems to me an absolute masterpiece, one of the greatest of all silent movies. It has been brilliantly discussed in such terms by Richard Combs in a short review in *Monthly Film Bulletin*. Combs summarises many of the film's remarkable qualities: its dreamlike density; its complex of 'correspondences, repetitions and reversals'; its surrealistic imagery; its Freudian resonances. He writes that 'It is one of those rare works in which every detail and gesture functions perfectly on both a literal and symbolic level, so that scenes do not so much open out as downwards... suggesting that the film is constantly plumbing the connections and uses of dreams' (1977: 267).

### Miscellany and conclusion

*Wenn das Herz in Hass erglüht* (Kurtz Matull, 1918), a Pola Negri film, had too much missing for one to be able to assess it properly. It does have a rather good sequence in a club, where a man who has been framed for cheating is simply too stunned to think clearly about what has happened to him. And it has a wonderful climax, in which Ilya (Negri), an ex-snake charmer, is saved from an alligator attack – the alligator released into her apartment by a jealous rival – by the prompt action of her snake, which wraps itself round the alligator. Above all, it has Negri herself, who is always worth watching.

*The Wheels of Chance* (Harold Shaw, 1922), taken from an H.G. Wells novel, is an amiable little comedy built around a cycling holiday taken by that Wells regular, a draper's assistant, here called Hoopdriver (George K. Arthur). He has adventures which might have been romantic, but he is disqualified from a happy ending by his class status. The film's title is entirely appropriate. In *Rotaie*, the wheels are wheels of fate, but here they merely lead to a chance encounter. The ending stresses Hoopdriver's return to obscurity. Wells, who had himself been a draper's assistant, obviously felt the class divisions of the time very keenly.

Occasionally in the past, but regularly for the last three years, children from the Scuola Media Centro Storico di Pordenone have accompanied a short film during the festival, the score composed by the children themselves and their teacher. This year the film was *The Playhouse* (Buster Keaton, 1921). Also this year, they were joined by a second school orchestra, from Scuola Media 'Leonardo da Vinci', Cordenons, who likewise composed the score for and accompanied *A Night in the Show* (Charles Chaplin, 1915). These events exemplify the integration of the festival into the local community. The children obviously enjoyed the occasion tremendously and did a wonderful job.

I did not like the closing night programme entitled 'Ukulelescope': clips from silent movies accompanied by the Ukulele Orchestra of Great Britain. The clips were not interesting, so the skill of the musicians seemed wasted. It would have been better if they had accompanied a feature-length movie.

The Giornate is not only very welcoming, it is also extremely well organised, a point that David Robinson has often made in his closing night speech. There have been an awful lot of problems to solve over the years, and only a few hiccups. Nevertheless, I would like to point out one lack this year, although I suspect that it was not the Giornate's fault. All the films screened have, where

necessary, both Italian and English translations of the intertitles. In the past, this was done by earphone commentary, but modern technology now allows laser titles to be projected. Unfortunately, for unknown reasons, a number of the National Film and Television Archive prints did not have an Italian translation.

I have concentrated in this report on the films I liked, but there were nevertheless sufficient of those for this to have been a good Giornate; not one of the very best, but nevertheless very satisfactory.

Michael Walker

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 Fotocollection Filmmuseum Vienna: *The Merry Widow*  
 Cinématèque Française: *Ce cochon de Morin*, *La dame masquée*, *Le chant de l'amour triomphant*  
 David Robinson: *Justice d'abord*  
 Gosfilmofond, Moscow: *Dom na Trubnoi*  
 AB Svensk Filmindustri: *Gunnar Hedes Saga*

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Michael Walker is an independent film scholar who joined the editorial board of the original *Movie* magazine in 1969 and who has contributed to several *Movie* anthologies.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.cinetecadelfriuli.org/gcm/ed\\_precedenti.html](http://www.cinetecadelfriuli.org/gcm/ed_precedenti.html)

<sup>2</sup> [www.cinetecadelfriuli.org/gcm/](http://www.cinetecadelfriuli.org/gcm/)