

THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GREAT FILMS WITH BRUCE JACKSON & DIANE CHRISTIAN

PRESENTED BY THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO AND THE MARKET ARCADE FILM AND ARTS CENTER

16 JANUARY 2001 (III:1): THE BIG PARADE (1925)

KING VIDOR (8 February 1894, Galveston, Texas—1 November 1982, Paso Robles, California) directed 56 films, the first of which was *The Grand Military Parade* 1913, and the last *Solomon and Sheba* 1959. Some of his others are *War and Peace* 1956, *Man Without a Star* 1955, *Ruby Gentry* 1952, *The Fountainhead* 1949, *Duel in the Sun* 1946, *Northwest Passage* 1940, *Stella Dallas* 1937, *The Texas Rangers* 1936, *Our Daily Bread* 1934, *The Champ* 1931, *Billy the Kid* 1930, *Hallelujah* 1929, *The Crowd* 1928, *La Boheme* 1926, *Peg o' My Heart* 1922, and *The Jack-Knife Man* 1920. Vidor wrote two interesting books: an autobiography, *A Tree is a Tree* (NY, Harcourt-Brace, 1953) and *King Vidor on Film-Making* (NY, McKay, 1972).

JOHN GILBERT (John Cecil Pringle, 10 July 1899, Logan, Utah—9 January 1936, Los Angeles, heart attack) had seven uncredited movie roles before his name first appeared on the screen in *The Phantom* 1916. At his peak, he was as popular as Valentino. He starred in four films with Garbo: *Love* 1927 (aka *Anna Karenina*), *Flesh and the Devil* 1927, *A Woman of Affairs* 1928, *Queen Christina* 1933. Gilbert appeared in 9 films in 1922, 8 in 1923, and 10 in 1924—more than 100 films in all. Some of the others were *The Captain Hates the Sea* 1934, *The Phantom of Paris* 1931, *Redemption* 1930, *Man, Woman and Sin* 1927, *The Merry Widow* 1925, *The Wolf Man* 1924, *While Paris Sleeps* 1923, *Monte Cristo* 1922, *Shame* 1921, and *Hell's Hinges* 1916.

PHILIP CARLI, pianist for tonight's screening of *The Big Parade*, began accompanying silent films at the age of 13, with a solo piano performance for Lon Chaney's 1923 version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* at his junior high school in California. He has toured extensively as a film accompanist throughout North America and Europe, performing at such venues as Lincoln Center and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the National Gallery in Washington, DC, the Cinémathèque Québécoise in Montreal, the National Film Theatre in London, and the Berlin International Film Festival. He is the staff accompanist for the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, and performs annually at several film festivals in the United States as well as at Le Giornate del Cinema Muto in Italy. He has recorded piano accompaniments to over fifty films for video release by the Library of Congress, a number of film and video companies, and for broadcast on the American Movie Classics and the Turner Classic Movies cable channels.

Averse to intellectual or mystical terms, few of the old directors would admit to that strange, almost electric current that passes between actor and director. When I asked Allan Dwan about his methods of direction, he replied, "I have none. It all depends what I ate for breakfast."

King Vidor was more explicit. "In the silent days, the players were supposed to know the character they were portraying. Sometimes they didn't even read the script, but there was a thing that went on, almost telepathic, between the director and the actor. Things developed in scenes while the camera was going. And we had music on the set—that was very helpful to get the mood. In *The Big Parade*, when Gilbert encounters a German soldier in the shellhole, that was ad-libbed. I didn't have a big voice; I might say "More," "Now," "That's wonderful," "That's great"I wouldn't talk all the time and I'd get silent as quickly as possible. It was hypnotism.

"Gilbert never read the script of *The Big Parade*, and there were other actors of the period like that. They had faith and confidence in you. They knew you had a way of transferring emotion to them. I can't rationalize it. It's like a love affair; you just can't describe it. I actually remember moments when I didn't say a thing. I'd just have a quick thought and Gilbert would react to it."

When the talkies came, the director could no longer direct during a shot. The musicians went, the megaphone went, the improvisation went. An icy, ghostly silence descended during shooting—a silence which was, ironically, to kill many talkies.

**Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By...* Berkeley and
Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968,74.**

What is the key to the seduction of silence? Is it the remoteness from cacophony of heavy metal and the ceaseless garrulousness of the TV tubes? Probably much of the special quality of silent cinema is a matter of participation. A

talkie can be experienced by simply sitting and allowing the sound to wash over one. But to see and make any sense at all of a silent movie, we *have to participate*. Just reading the dialogue titles in itself is active participation. We give the dialogue the inflections that qualify the meaning of the words. (Some watchers, in fact, participated too completely—they read the titles aloud and made unbearable nuisances of themselves.) Perhaps this act of partaking—of sharing in the illusion that is cinema—involves us in a far more subtle response than we have supposed. Some thirty years ago a team of medical researchers decided, on the basis of their experiments, that image retention was not simply a physical characteristic of the eye's retina, but in the central nervous system. Hurrah! That would place our emotional response to film on a basis comparable to our thrill over certain combinations of musical notes when a symphony orchestra brings us to tears or exaltation.

James Card, *Seductive Cinema*, Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press 1999 [1994], 302-303

As Lillian Gish never tired of pointing out, the 'silent' film was never silent. Even in the primitive period, there was a pianist or an organist putting music to film. The big downtown theatres usually began continuous showings at 10:00 a.m. Until the two evening performances, the film would be accompanied by a skillful organist seated at the mighty Wurlitzer. The evening shows boasted full orchestral accompaniment. The musicians were fine, well-paid professionals led by experts who knew very much what they were about.

James Card, *Seductive Cinema*, 27-28

...it was taken for granted that early films would not be shown at a constant speed at all. The situation was summed up by F. R. Richardson in the projection department of the *Moving Picture World*, December 2, 1911: "Speed is of very very great importance and a comprehension of this fact is absolutely necessary to do really fine projection. The operator 'renders' a film, if he is a real operator, exactly as does the musician render a piece of music, in that, within limits, the action of a scene being portrayed depends entirely on his judgement. Watch the scene closely and by variation of speed bring out everything there is in it. No set rule applies. Only the application of brains to the matter of speed can properly render a film. I have often changed speed half a dozen times on one film of 1000 feet."

Unfortunately, the creative operator that Mr. Richardson called for was more often a workman under strict orders from his boss, the theatre manager, to give him a fast or a slow show, depending on activity at the box office.

Filmmakers were aware of the tendency to speed up their pictures in projection. They sought to offset the resulting frantic action by having cameramen shoot faster and faster. Thus many films toward the end of the silent period were actually produced with the studio cameras operating faster than sound speed. When such films are projected at sixteen frames per second by misguided film societies, the distortion can be enormous.

James Card, *Seductive Cinema*, 54-55

In the wonderful days of speechless cinema there was no problem about young people learning to read. We were seeing movies two or three times a week, and we *had* to know what Tom Mix and Doug Fairbanks were saying. We didn't learn to read very much in school. It was the subtitles in silent movies that taught us—fast. And the vocabulary wasn't limited to the silly doings of Bob, Jane and Rover.

In 1922 I was six and in *Robin Hood* I had to read Guy of Gisbourne calling Doug Fairbanks a "sycophant." None of us was at all sure what the word meant, but it looked awfully bad and seemed more than enough to justify Robin Hood's cracking the bad guy's spine around a pole—just as he'd threatened to do after being called so dastardly a name.

When we reenacted *Robin Hood* all summer long with our home-made bows and arrows and battled one another with lathes hammered into heavy swords, as we snarled "Sycophant!" at our opponents, we may have mispronounced it, but we had been able to read it without academic assistance. By 1925 we were reading such words as "brontosaurus" and "pterodactyl"—but, of course, only in the movies.

It was an ideally shadowy life and in retrospect I realize I learned infinitely more from movies than they were able to teach me in school. Granted, the school of cinema provided some inaccuracies in the information afforded, but then what the schools were teaching in the twenties (especially in physics) in later years proved to be just about as erroneous as the history and science emerging from the screenplays of the time.

James Card, *Seductive Cinema*, 55-56

The historic fact is that more silent films were *intended* to be shown at speeds that were much closer to the sound projector's eleven and two-thirds minutes per reel than the legendary silent speed of sixteen frames per second, which drags the film along at sixteen minutes and forty seconds a reel!

In many, many cases, major silent productions were released with instructions that they be projected at speeds *faster* than current sound speed.

Even beginning film students must realize that most silent films were produced by hand-cranked cameras. Each operator prided himself on his own cadence, believing that regardless of the tempo or the excitement of what he filmed, his hand turned the crank at an unvarying rate with all the precision of a machine.

Precise or not, each cameraman's cadence was different from the other's. Moreover, Ince's scripts of 1912 to 1914 often carried specific instructions to the cameraman to "Crank faster here." How many frames per second was "faster"?

James Card, *Seductive Cinema*, 53

Join us next week, Tuesday, January 23, for Mervyn LeRoy's and Busby Berkeley's great Depression musical, *GOLD DIGGERS OF 1933*, starring Ginger Rogers, Dick Powell, Ruby Keeler, Joan Blondell...

...email Bruce Jackson: bjackson@buffalo.edu

...email Diane Christian: engdc@acsu.buffalo.edu...

...for the series schedule, links and updates: www.buffalofilmseminars.com

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