ANCIENT ROCKETS

Ancient Rockets: Treasures and Trainwrecks of the Silent Screen
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Ancient Rockets

Treasures and Trainwrecks of the Silent Screen

KAGE BAKER

Edited by Kathleen Bartholomew

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INTRODUCTION

Kathleen Bartholomew

My sister Kage Baker was a cinephile and a history buff. The combination made her a natural fan of silent movies. She loved the crisp light of black-and-white films. She loved the classic scores. She loved the actual old cities in the backgrounds. She loved the way a new method of telling stories grew up, when directors realized they could change the audience's POV just by walking the camera 12 feet to the left.

Kage originally intended these reviews for Tor Books as a pleasant time-filler. But it only took the first one—posted January 12, 2009, on Georges Méliès's *Le Voyage dans la Lune*—for her to get fascinated. She was charmed by the earliest visual takes on fantastic literature. She wanted to share it, to disseminate the beauty, cleverness, insight—yes, and the dreadful corn and unintentional humor, too. Modern cinema is a master magician—she wanted its jaded audience to realize that the earliest days had been just as slick, just as inventive, just as amazing in context.

One of the things that intrigued Kage was how soon the movies applied themselves to fantasy. And how much—when she set herself to finding early science fiction films, she found she'd uncovered a treasure-trove. For every well-known classic like *Metropolis*, there was some film now unknown and even better. For every gem there were a half dozen utter pieces of crap, too, which she enjoyed for their accidental hilarity and on which she spent just as much care analyzing.

The idea for this topic started in a long scene from *Mendoza In Hollywood*: the First Cahuenga Pass Film Festival, where the Company operatives stationed in 1860s Hollywood spend a hysterical evening

watching *Intolerance*. Kage and I and several friends watched that film a dozen times for research, getting sillier and angrier and more into its weird ambiance every time. It's a dreadful, hypnotic work of genius and flaming ignorance—in her novel, at the end of the film, Kage's operatives go briefly mad under its weight of mortality and grief and bad costuming.

Kage wanted to share that experience with a larger audience. She called the series "Ancient Rockets" and laid it out for the curious to explore.

All these reviews were written during the last year of Kage's life. I don't think that affected her view much—sometimes she was so tired that watching films and composing reviews was all she could manage, so they got her nearly undivided attention. As the year wore on, more and more of them were composed *ex tempore* and dictated to me; I think there is a more conversational style in those, as we argued out the reviews. One she recited in a single long soliloquy in her hospital room; it was written that evening, as I doggedly transferred Kage's voice from my head to paper.

The last one is dated December 21, 2009. Three days later, we discovered her cancer had metastasized to her brain. A month later, she was gone.

So, here are the Ancient Rockets, for your edification and delight. Kage enjoyed doing these, and loved sharing them. They're her most personal voice—intimate and relaxed, the tone her friends and family heard when watching movies with her. I am grateful to Jacob Weisman and Tachyon Publications for making it possible to share them with all of you.

Enjoy, folks.
—Kathleen Bartholomew

ouch....

ANCIENT ROCKETS

(Le Voyage dans la Lune)

JANUARY 12, 2009

No, this isn't a Von Danikenist tract; it's the first in a series of looks back at early science fiction cinema. And where better to begin than 1902, with *Le Voyage dans la Lune*?

Written and directed by French showman Georges Méliès, *Le Voyage* features one of the most indelible images in cinema history: the wounded Man in the Moon bleeding like a particularly runny Brie, grimacing in pain with a space capsule protruding from his right eye. For me, though, there is a much more iconic moment earlier in the film.

It opens at a meeting of astronomers, arguing violently as one of them proposes a trip to the moon. They wear pointed hats and robes embroidered with moons and stars. They wear starched ruffs. Nothing in any frame suggests their meeting isn't taking place in the 14th century. And then, having agreed on the proposed voyage at last, the astronomers call in servants to bring them changes of clothing.

They shed the wizards' garb and dress in frock coats and top hats. Before our eyes, the Mage becomes the Scientist. This is the cinematic moment where the fairy tale mutates into science fiction, and every film Scientist—Rotwang, Dr. Zarkov, mad or otherwise—descends from this.

We get to watch the capsule being built and the casting of the great gun that will fire it moonward, before our heroes mount over the village rooftops to climb inside their vessel. Chorus girls in racy sailor suits load it into the great gun, a soldier flourishes a saber, and *boom!* Away go the intrepid astronomers, in a puff of stage smoke.

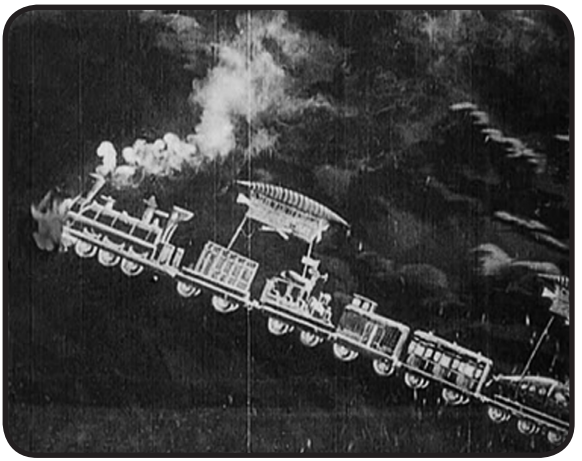
The stage moon becomes the smiling Man in the Moon, and then... eeeew.

But our heroes have landed! They stumble out on the cratered surface of the Moon and watch the Earth rise! A small volcano erupts, knocking them on their behinds! Fatigued by all this discovery they lie down and sleep. Several planetary gods appear, pretty irritated by human presumption, and send a snowstorm to punish the voyagers. Our heroes seek refuge in a crater and discover an underground world, complete with running water and mushrooms of enormous size.

The Selenites come bounding into frame, vaudeville acrobats dressed up in papier-mâché heads and lobster suits. With a magnificent disregard for Noninterference Directives, our heroes swing at them with their umbrellas and burst them like so many balloons, until they are overwhelmed and dragged before the Chief of the Selenites. One good body blow takes care of *him*, though—Captain Kirk's diplomatic style foreshadowed here—and the astronomers race back to their space capsule with the Selenites in hot pursuit.

Tipping their capsule off a cliff into space, the astronomers plunge back down to Earth (talk about your gravity wells) dragging a Selenite with them. They land in the sea, in a nice little effects shot with a few real fish, and are given a heroes' welcome and a parade. The captive Selenite is displayed. The leader of the astronomers gets a statue.

It's all there in a nutshell, the template for future SF films. We will boldly go/go boldly to distant planets, we will see amazing things, and if we get into trouble we'll kick some alien butt. No apologies, no regrets. Those were the days!



Wagon Train to the Staaaaaars!

IMPOSSIBLE VOYAGE

(Voyage à Travers L'Impossible)

JANUARY 20, 2009

In 1904, a couple of years after his groundbreaking *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, Georges Méliès tried his hand at a more ambitious science fiction epic. *Voyage à Travers L'Impossible* ("A Voyage Across the Impossible," although more usually translated as simply "Impossible Voyage"), is around 20 minutes long, depending on whether you see the cheap version or the one with the bonus footage Méliès provided to exhibitors who paid extra. The concept of the deluxe 2-disc set has clearly been around a while. *Voyage à Travers L'Impossible*, in addition to being a longer film, is much more painstakingly hand-tinted. Where the previous film had a palette of grays, pale greens and blues, this *Voyage* blazes with gold and crimson. The result, while undeniably a special-effects extravaganza, is the first-ever instance of a science fiction plotline suffering at the expense of its gosh-wow visuals.

And, as with the earlier film, Méliès drew on the novels of Jules

Verne for his inspiration, but more specifically he roughly copied one of Verne's own plays. The "Institute of Incoherent Geography," headed by M. Mabouloff, ventures forth on an expedition around the world. They set out in a locomotive loaded with all sorts of nifty-looking craft, including a submarine, a couple of airships, and an "Impossible Carriage," which seems to be a sort of automobile. Reaching the Swiss Alps, they transfer to the automobile and promptly have a devastating road accident, sending everyone to the hospital. Ford Explorer, I guess.

Fully recovered from this inexplicable plot digression (maybe road accidents were thought to be a laff riot in 1904?), our heroes board the locomotive once more, and it chugs away across the mountains. Higher and higher it goes, until it vaults into the stars. It zooms along through space, evidently held up by its twin airships, past a few charmingly animated comets and planetary systems and one obvious sparkler left over from Bastille Day. *Mais non!* Here comes the Sun, and we ain't talking Beatles songs: it's the Man in the Sun, who yawns so widely the Star Locomotive flies straight into his mouth. He gasps, he coughs, he vomits fire. Does he spit the ruined train out on the surface of Mercury? Despite most synopses insisting our heroes have crashed on the sun, it's later clearly visible in the sky, so I'm going with Mercury.

The expedition members pick themselves out of the ruins of the train. This was the point where it dawned on me that there women among the members—another first for sci-fi films! I was also diverted to learn that the conical felt hat was actually worn by someone besides Chico Marx and Pagliacci. Our heroes and heroines wander around exclaiming over the scenery awhile before suddenly being overcome with the heat. Fortunately their boxcar full of glacier ice (???) survived the crash, so M. Mabouloff herds everyone into it and shuts the door. Too late, he realizes he ought to have gotten in, too, but when he opens the freezer door again he discovers all the other expedition members frozen in a block of ice. The first-ever instance of cryogenics in a film!

So the dude gets out (I'm not kidding) a couple of *hay bales* they brought along and, spreading them under the boxcar, sets fire to them. The crew thaws out, revived. Fortunately their submarine survived the crash, too. It's not only a charming little copy of Señor Monturiol's actual 1858 *Ictineo II*, it works as a space capsule! They climb in,

plummet down to Earth, and deploy a parachute at the last minute to soften their sea landing—another first-time-on-film. Their undersea journey takes place in a cutaway version of the sub, which, I believe, is yet another first. Alas, the sub explodes and sends the expedition members sky-high once more, although this time they land safely in a harbor and are rescued by the cheering multitudes.

See? Lots of flashy tech, uneven plotting, zippo character development. Science fiction cinema had already become the creature we all know and love...

And yet, that little train is just so darned cute. Look at what it implies in self-confidence, for 1904. Man—er, Humanity—will travel across the Earth, into the Sky, and under the Sea. Not only that, we will have the foresight to bring along hay for any Star Cows we encounter and plenty of ice for our champagne.

You talking to me?

FRANKENSTEIN

Frankenstein

JANUARY 26, 2009

In a perfect world, the next in this series would be an examination of the 1908 *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, but I have been unable to determine whether a copy still exists. The odds aren't good, given the low cultural value accorded to cinema at this time. For example, a lot of Georges Méliès's films were recycled to make celluloid boot heels for the French Army. Even if a copy of the 1908 *J&H* lay forgotten on a shelf somewhere, it would have taken a miracle—or a Company operative working on the sly—to prevent it from deteriorating into a mound of rusty flakes during the century since its release.

For years, it had been assumed that the same fate had befallen cinema's first-ever depiction of the creation of an artificial life form, Edison's 1910 *Frankenstein*. As late as the 1970s, only a plot outline and some stills were known to exist. Then a single print was found in the collection of a Wisconsin film collector, who had had the foresight

to back it up on a 35mm copy. As a result, we get to see the missing link between *Frankenstein*'s 19th-century stage tradition and Boris Karloff's iconic role.

As you might expect, the Edison Company messed with Mary Shelley's plot, to make it fit both their filming budget and American post-Victorian sensibilities. Briefly: Frankenstein leaves home and sweetheart to go off to college, invents a way to create an artificial human being, does it, is horrified by the results, goes home and marries his sweetheart. The jealous Monster barges in on the bride but is chased out. The Monster sees himself in a mirror and, overwhelmed by his own ugliness, vanishes away, leaving only a reflection in the mirror. Frankenstein enters, sees the Monster's reflection gradually replaced by his own, and damn near faints, but his bride enters and they embrace. All in just over 12 minutes. A few thoughts:

Rather than have Frankenstein dig up corpses and piece together the usable bits to create his Monster, this version has him simply tossing a few chemicals into a huge vat and standing back to see what grows. Presumably the director thought the American public wouldn't stand for the grisliness of the original plot, but his alternative is still one of the creepiest scenes ever filmed. A crude figure of the Monster was made, most likely out of paper and rags, and set on fire. The result was filmed and then run backward.

We see Frankenstein close the doors—on some kind of furnace?—and peer eagerly through a peephole. The camera shifts to Frankenstein's point of view and we see a nasty-looking mass rise slowly from the vat. The misshapen thing jerks upward, and begins to take on skeletal features; almost at once its right arm twitches, rises, and begins to flail around. A head grows on the shoulders. Another arm begins to wave. Patchwork flesh clothes the skeleton like moss, unevenly. James Whale's Monster is a draped nonentity until his one-two-three close-up on its dead face, and the Bride of Frankenstein is born in unearthly beauty, but this one is really the stuff of nightmares.

And then here's the Big Guy, as portrayed by Charles Ogle, blundering into frame for the first time in cinema history. Despite his chemical birth, he is given the general appearance of a decaying corpse. His costume and wild mass of hair seem arbitrary and bizarre, until

you see engravings of the first stage interpretations of the Monster, from 1823: clearly the costume and makeup owe something to the work of some long-forgotten London stage tech. And, with all due respect to Whale's makeup man Jack Pierce, he did *not* invent the Monster's flat-headed skull, as the illustration above makes perfectly obvious. Ogle is a better actor than the rest of the cast, managing to convey the Monster's unnatural strength and speed. Not bad, considering that his only previous film role was Bob Cratchit in a long-lost silent *Christmas Carol*.

We must never forget, though, that the title of the story is *Frankenstein*. The real villain is not the Monster but his creator, the first-ever Mad Scientist. Edison's version renders the moral with a unique twist: Frankenstein seeks to create perfect life, but because his *mind* is evil, his creation is therefore evil, too. When his "better nature" is strengthened by his love for his bride, his evil creation must logically cease to exist. Oh, really? The Monster is just going to fade away? Happy ending?

This is without question the easiest Get-Out-Of-Jail-Free card ever handed to a Frankenstein, or any other Mad Scientist. Subsequent toilers amongst the Bunsen burners and test tubes will have to pay for their arrogance by being thrown off burning windmills, chased over ice floes, or (as in the case of *Blade Runner*) just getting their heads squished. Even Frank N. Furter gets zapped to death with a ray gun, for God's sake. We who grew up with "drop and cover" drills know all too well what wonders Science can bring us, and we like to see the guy in the white lab coat suffer a little. Or a lot.

But 1910 was a more innocent age...

How much for a lap dance?

JEKYLL AND HYDE

(Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde)

FEBRUARY 2, 2009

The 1910 Edison film of *Frankenstein* was itself a dead thing revived by technology. How appropriate, on attempting to review the silent version of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, to discover that I need to present two reviews in one.

J&H may well hold the title of Most Filmed Novella Ever, especially if you count knockoffs of its central premise. It's been rumored a version was produced in 1897, but no hard evidence exists. The 1908 version has been, apparently, lost. New York–based Thanhouser Films produced the earliest adaptation still surviving, from 1912. The following year saw at least four new versions committed to film, and several others followed before the advent of talkies. For symmetry's sake, we'll confine ourselves to two.

Thanhouser produced generally high-quality one-reelers between 1910 and 1917. Its 1912 *Jekyll and Hyde* may seem clumsy and primi-

tive, but it's light years more advanced in film technique than Edison's *Frankenstein*. Thanhouser's *J&H* is notable also for its introduction of romance into Robert Louis Stevenson's story, beginning a tradition that continues up to the present time. In the original tale, Dr. Jekyll is an elderly hypocrite who, like Faust, regrets he wasted his youth in earning public plaudits while concealing his natural urges. He devises the chemical formula enabling his id to move about independently; Mr. Hyde is born. As Hyde, Jekyll enjoys himself without any scandal, until Hyde becomes the dominant personality. But Stevenson knew exactly what his Victorian readers would stand for, and Hyde's lusts are never specifically detailed.

Thanhouser's Jekyll (stock player James Cruze) proceeds from mere scientific curiosity. Reading from a text titled "Graham on Drugs," which states baldly that a drug exists that will divide the good and evil sides of human nature, he gives it a try. Hyde pops out, a little grinning goblin with fangs, and runs amok in the local village. Realizing his mistake, Jekyll stops his experiments and sets about courting the local minister's daughter. Alas, merely strolling down a country lane with her is enough to summon Hyde. He assaults her (well, threatens her; this was 1912) and clubs the minister to death when he attempts to defend her. She runs off, finds a convenient British bobby on the streets of New Rochelle, and Hyde is chased back to Jekyll's laboratory, where he commits suicide.

Paramount's 1920 *Jekyll and Hyde* is much more faithful to the original story, and goes into much darker places.

John Barrymore's Dr. Jekyll is a spotless young saint, running the local free clinic. He is, of course, engaged to a beautiful and innocent girl, but in this case her father is a debauched old gent who persuades Jekyll to try a few nasty pleasures before the wedding night. Jekyll goes along with him to a music hall (nasty? Well, this was 1920) where he is immediately attracted to a sensuous dancer. He wants her! But he can't have her! Unless... The pure-hearted youth concocts the formula to enable him to purge his vicious longings by creating Edward Hyde.

Barrymore's Mr. Hyde starts out looking mostly human (Barrymore seems to be doing an impression of his brother Lionel) but wears progressively more appliance makeup as the film progresses, and leaps

gleefully over the line into Subhuman. The moment arrives when Jekyll loses control and transforms into Hyde in his sleep, and this is No. 2 on my list of Most Horrific Moments in Silent Film. An immense spiderlike creature crawls from under Jekyll's bed as he sleeps, and comes up over the foot of it, and advances on him...

Well, you know how the story ends, right? Lots of sex (as much as could be implied in 1920) and violence, and a very bad end for the saintly doctor. And the moral is...but what exactly *is* the moral? Is it Stevenson's original premise, substituting Science for Mephistopheles? Or is it Thanhouser's moral, which simply warns against scientific curiosity? One thing is certain: If you have a brilliant scientist as a prospective son-in-law, think twice before throwing him a stag party.

Santa, the pirate look doesn't really work for you...

NEMO!

(20,000 Leagues Under the Sea)
FEBRUARY 9, 2009

In 1916, Universal Studios released the first filmed adaptation of Jules Verne's novel *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Georges Méliès made a film by that name in 1907, but, unlike his earlier adaptations of Verne, Méliès' version bears no resemblance to the book. In Universal's effort, we are looking at the earliest-surviving full-length big-budget science fiction film. And already the rot had set in.

I can just imagine Carl Laemmle and the director sitting there in some office on Lankershim Boulevard, when this thing was in development. "Say, this is swell! We've got a hot property by a best-selling author! We have THOUSANDS of dollars to spend on special effects! The American public will go crazy over it! But, you know...all that science and exploration and philosophy stuff is box-office poison, so let's bring in some scriptwriters to make a few changes in the story."

Yeah. *That* rot.

You know this drill already, right? The "We don't care if he's a best-selling author, we have to change his story so it'll appeal to people *now*" line? The "Gotta stick a love interest in there somewhere" line? The "Who cares if it's stupid? We have SPECIAL EFFECTS" line? To be fair, the special effects were impressive for the time. Mostly. George and J. Ernest Williamson pioneered a system of underwater photography without actual underwater cameras, and their shots of fish and coral reefs seen through crystal-clear Bahamian water must have astonished people in 1916. Less effective is the giant prop octopus, which looks as though your average middle-school class could have built it for a parade float. It's still a better piece of construction than the script.

And oh, the script. It starts out reasonably faithful to Verne's book: Professor Aronnax and Ned Land are introduced, but a daughter is invented for Aronnax and stuck into the plot for no apparent reason. The three are knocked from the deck of the *Abraham Lincoln* into the sea, and rescued by Captain Nemo in his super-submarine, the *Nautilus*. Nemo is played by Allen Holubar, an actor who conveyed extremes of emotion by smacking the back of his fist against his forehead and sagging forward. He treats his prisoners (and the audience) to a session at his private viewing porthole, where the wonders of the undersea world can be seen.

Here the scriptwriters seem to have lost faith in Verne's (and the special effects') ability to keep an audience interested, because the plot and characters of Verne's *The Mysterious Island* are dragged in, and that ain't all: a Wild Girl who lives as a Child of Nature on the island is created. Her Child of Nature frolicking is on a par with Holubar's acting style. One longs to hear what Servo, Crow, and Joel might have said about it... Anyway, she's the love interest, falling for one of the handsome Yankees stranded on the island. It just gets worse after that.

Cyrus Harding's servant Neb is played by Leviticus Jones, apparently an actual black actor, without any eye-rolling or minstrel-show comedy. Just as I was awarding the movie points for enlightened attitude, Neb was attacked by the prop octopus, rescued by one of Nemo's crew, and thrown back in his boat to drift out of frame. Apparently the script writers forgot about him, because he is never seen again. Nemo and his long-lost daughter the Child of Nature (*of*

course she turns out to be his daughter!) wear a sort of Asian blackface, and a huge flashbacked plot digression ("Captain Nemo's Origins—the story Jules Verne never told") tells how a lustful member of the British Raj attacked Nemo's wife and stole his little daughter, only to abandon her on a desert island. Flash forward to the present and the remorseful Brit sails back to the island in his yacht, where he proceeds to get lost and faint a lot.

I could go on and on, but it's probably enough to say that Disney, in the 1950s, did a much better job with its version. Let me close this on a brighter note, with a sweet bit of historical speculation: the French inventor Brutus de Villeroi, who built the U.S. Navy's first submarine, tested his prototype in the harbor at Nantes back in 1835, when Verne was seven years old. Verne was born and raised in Nantes. Did he watch the prototype submarine being tested? Did a spark jump in the child's mind? Was that the moment when science fiction was born?

Well, there's your problem! The timing chain broke!

THE GOLEM

(The Golem: How He Came Into the World)

FEBRUARY 16, 2009

Let's say you need a perfectly obedient servant who never gets tired, never needs to be paid, and is virtually indestructible. If you're in a galaxy a long time ago and far, far away, you'll just fly off to the local droid auction and pick up one of those shiny gold models with lovely manners. If you're a rabbi in 16th-century Prague, on the other hand, your options are strictly DIY: you'll just have to make yourself a golem.

According to Jewish legend, only the very wisest and very holiest rabbis had the power to make golems, animated servants of clay. Strictly speaking, the golem is not in the same class with Frankenstein's Monster, because the golem is neither alive nor dead. He is, rather, the ancestor of all robots. So were the metal servants created by the Greek god Hephaestus, but as far as I know no one has ever been inspired to make a film about them.

In 1913, the noted German actor and director Paul Wegener was

making a film in Prague when he heard the legend of Rabbi Loew, who created a golem to protect the inhabitants of the Prague ghetto from persecution.

Intrigued, Wegener wrote, filmed, and starred in a horror story wherein a modern-day antiques dealer purchases a golem found in an ancient synagogue, brings it to life, and suffers the consequences when things go horribly wrong. *The Golem*, from 1915, is a lost film, as is its 1917 sequel, *The Golem and the Dancing Girl*. All that survives of Wegener's trilogy is 1920's *The Golem: How He Came Into the World*.

Paul Wegener in the title role is impressive, with his stolid features and pale eyes blazing out of his dark face. One can only guess how much the costume and stiff wig weighed, to say nothing of the platform boots. Karl Freud's cinematography is wonderful, from the ancient sunlight slanting down into the ghetto streets to the demon-haunted darkness of the rabbi's spell-casting chamber. Cinematically, as one of the great examples of German Expressionism, it's a masterpiece. Karel Çapek was influenced by it when he wrote *Rossum's Universal Robots.*

For a modern audience, especially if any members of that audience are into the Kabbalah, there are problems.

Let's get the racism out of the way first. Rabbi Loew brings Wegener's Golem to life, not by virtue of his Talmudic studies or his personal holiness, but by the black arts. He studies astrology, he studies necromancy, he summons a demon to learn the secret word that animates inert matter. Certain Jews in the ghetto are depicted as greedy for bribes. Loew's daughter is shown as such a fleshly wanton she practically wears a sign saying *I AM A SLUT!* Her eagerness to take a gentile lover sets the catastrophe of the last act in motion, culminating in the Golem dragging her by her hair through the streets.

The other problem for a modern audience—well, let's be fair. If you've never read any of Terry Pratchett's Discworld books, or seen the TV adaptation of *Hogfather*, then you won't find yourself giggling at how much Hans Poelzig's vision of a medieval ghetto resembles Ankh-Morpork. Due to the costumer's odd decision to put all the Jews in pointy hats, it looks as though the wizard faculty of the Unseen University is hosting a visiting delegation of teachers from Hogwarts.

The green floating face of the demon Astaroth is spooky and impressive, in a wonderful monster-creation scene, but... remember that *South Park* episode in which Kyle goes to Hebrew Camp and Metatron appears to judge the craft projects? Darn. I probably shouldn't have mentioned that, because now you *will* remember it when you watch this classic film, and you'll be snickering, too.

But the day may come when all the pop-culture references are forgotten, and our descendants will feel nothing but awe as they watch Wegener's Golem lurching slowly through the narrow lanes, implacable as HAL 9000, deadly as the Terminator, angry as Bender. He has only the beginning of a sense of self, and, unfortunately, resentment has been his first emotion. He has never heard of any Three Laws of Robotics... perhaps our descendants will think twice, the next time they get one of those glossy vid-catalogs advertising a perfectly obedient robot butler.

Are you glad to see me, or is that a carburetor in your pocket?

HOUDINI

(The Master Mystery)

FEBRUARY 23, 2009

In 1919, magician and showman Harry Houdini signed an agreement to star in a 15-part thriller serial called *The Master Mystery*. It was not, as you might expect, solely an excuse to showcase Houdini's extraordinary abilities as an escape artist, although there are plenty of scenes in which Houdini is obliged to writhe out of handcuffs. There are also some actually fairly decent science fictional elements in the story. Although the metal man in the picture shown here is sometimes described as the first robot depicted on film, it would be more accurate to describe "the Automaton" as a cyborg.

The plot revolves around a pair of wealthy businessmen, Balcom and Brent, who buy patents from inventors and then suppress their inventions so as to avoid upsetting the status quo. Houdini plays Quentin Locke, an agent of the Justice Department sent to spy on Brent. He discovers that Brent has begun to feel pangs of guilt for his

part in the racket. Brent's partner Balcom takes steps to ensure that Brent won't cause trouble. He summons the Automaton to do his dirty work!

The Automaton, supposedly, was created in Madagascar by putting a human brain in a super-powered metal body. Why Madagascar? Maybe it sounded exotic. The Automaton has a subterranean lair in some caverns under Brent's mansion, with access (via secret passages) to just about every room in the house. The Automaton also commands a gang of minions, circa 1919: they wear plug caps and sweaters like the Weasels in Disney's *Mr. Toad*. Their business is to cringe and fawn before the Automaton and to come up with various sadistic perils in which to place Houdini's character. Never once does it seem to occur to any of them that they might simply shoot Quentin Locke. No, they tie him up and dangle him over pits of acid, drop him in the sea, tie him to a torturer's wheel, arrange for him to be thrown into a fire-pit as an offering to a Chinese fire demon...

All the *effective* villainy is reserved for the Automaton. Having apparently decided that if you want anything done right, you have to do it yourself, it is the Automaton who substitutes a candelabra full of poisoned candles (I'm serious) for an identical but harmless one and then cuts the electricity to Brent's mansion. Brent lights the candles. They diffuse a poisonous smoke as they burn. The poison causes Brent to descend into a state of giggling idiocy known as the Madagascar Madness, in which he remains until the last reel of the film.

Most of the rest of the plot involves Balcom's attempts to coerce Brent's pretty daughter into marrying Balcom's gangster son, in order to force her to sign her shares of the business over to him, with a subplot involving Brent's secretary, who may or may not be his illegitimate daughter. Both women are powerfully attracted to Quentin Locke, of course. Sooner or later people notice the Automaton sneaking in and out of rooms in the mansion and we get perhaps the first instance of the heroine-menaced-by-inhuman-monster scene. Anyone fond of early pulp-crime thrillers will enjoy Balcom Junior's rendezvous with his gun moll, Deluxe Dora, at the Black Tom Club. A couple of ancillary villains join the fun in the persons of an astrologer with dubious credentials and the Madagascar Strangler (the scriptwriters

must have just liked the word. *Madagascar!*). There is also a fairly neat demon statue that shoots something like laser beams from its eyes.

Alas, the same cannot be said for the Automaton. All the advertising posters for *The Master Mystery* depict the Automaton with glowing eyes, but the actual robot costume merely has big google eyes like the hard sugar sort on cheaper varieties of chocolate Easter bunnies. Worse still, the Automaton turns out not to be a supercriminal's brain in a robot body after all. The man in the suit (come on, you knew all along it would turn out to be a man in a suit) is actually Balcom Junior, although the suit does apparently give him super-strength and the ability to electrocute people by shooting lightning bolts from his fingertips. So in the end we're talking something more like a proto–*Iron Man*.

Given Houdini's mega-celebrity status, it's curious that his films have barely survived. Two episodes of *The Master Mystery* have been lost, others exist only in fragments, and it's the most complete of his existing work. You'd think some time-traveling bunch of cinephiles would have secreted away a few complete prints, but apparently not. Kino has presented a handsome DVD package with as complete a restoration as could be managed, at least. A word of warning, though: if you're going to sit through this thing, make yourself an extra-large tub of popcorn, because it's more than four hours long. Even an Automaton would need a bathroom break after the third hour.

Guys? I'm ready to come out now! Guys? I'm freezing here! GUYS?

HOUDINI ON ICE

(The Man From Beyond)

MARCH 2, 2009

In 1921, Harry Houdini started his own film company called—wait for it—the Houdini Picture Corporation. Last week's subject, 1919's *The Master Mystery*, had been a box-office success. Encouraged, Paramount signed Houdini to a two-picture contract, but Houdini quickly tired of Hollywood and returned to New York to run his own show. The first of his solo efforts, 1921's *The Man From Beyond*, involves cryogenic suspension (sort of), and as such rates inclusion into the list of Silent SF.

Besides, it's interesting from a historical point of view, in that it was filmed just prior to Houdini's break with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The two had met in 1920 and both shared an interest in Spiritualism. Yes, I know, Conan Doyle invented ultra-rational detective Sherlock Holmes; but a lot of grieving parents, Conan Doyle among them, got involved with Spiritualism after losing their sons in World War

I. Houdini, although a skeptic, was open-minded and moreover struggling to come to terms with the recent death of his adored mother. As an accomplished illusionist himself, he had strong doubts about the veracity of most professional mediums, but he was willing to believe in life after death in principle.

The Man From Beyond was made, in part, as a tip of the hat to his friend Conan Doyle. The plot concerns a sailor who, in 1821, falls in love with a beautiful ship's passenger. The ship is blown off course into arctic waters. Howard Hillary (Houdini's character, in case you hadn't guessed) angers his captain, and winds up locked below decks when the ship is abandoned during a storm. He escapes the captain and rushes up on deck, only to be frozen into a block of glacial ice.

Flash forward a hundred years to the plight of an arctic explorer and his *metis* guide, the only survivors of a doomed expedition. They happen on Hillary's ship locked in an ice floe. Going aboard, they find Hillary inside his giant ice cube. Sinclair, the explorer, goes below and reads all the documents that were conveniently left lying around in order to bring him up to speed on how Hillary got there. Duval, the guide, gets out his hatchet and chops Hillary out of the ice. Not having anything better to do, I guess, they build a fire in the stove and lean the frozen corpse against it to see how long it'll take him to thaw.

But, surprise! When thawed, Hillary springs to life, completely unaware that a century has passed since last he held his sweetheart Felice in his arms. His rescuers decide not to clue him in about the time passage thing and he believes the year is still 1821. Somehow or other Sinclair, Duval, and Hillary all get safely back to New York. You'd think Hillary would begin to suspect something was wrong, what with all the horseless carriages in the streets, but noooo. The three walk into the mansion of Sinclair's brother-in-law, where his niece is in the very act of being married to Mr. Wrong. Do I have to tell you her name is also Felice? Or that she's a dead ringer for Hillary's 1821 girlfriend? Or that she agrees to postpone the wedding when Hillary interrupts it, even though he is immediately hauled off to an insane asylum for talking crazy?

At the asylum, our hero is put into a straitjacket and locked in a padded cell. You can guess what he does next, right? There's a lot

of improbable plot back-and-forth (Hillary doesn't figure out it's now *19*21 until his reincarnated sweetie shows him a newspaper, for God's sake). The jilted bridegroom chases Felice into a frozen river, whence Hillary narrowly rescues her from being swept over Niagara Falls. The happy ending shows the fond couple discussing the latest work on Spiritualism by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, which makes some astonishing claims. Were you aware that both Moses and Jesus believed in reincarnation? Me neither.

The pacing is awful and the plot logic has holes through which you could sail the *Titanic*, but Houdini meant well. His publicity department marketed *The Man From Beyond* as a supernatural thriller, and one supposes Conan Doyle was flattered at the plug for his book. Alas...

Two months after *The Man From Beyond* was released, Conan Doyle's wife (a self-professed medium) offered to try to communicate with Houdini's late mother for him. The shades were drawn, paper for automatic writing was set out, and...Houdini's mum got on the ectoplasmophone for a chat, all right, but she wrote in perfect English, and moreover drew the sign of the Cross on the paper. The deceased lady having been a rabbi's wife, and having moreover never learned to speak more than a little broken English, Houdini knew at once that the communication was bogus. Hideously disappointed, Houdini nevertheless kept his outrage to himself for a couple of years, out of his regard for Conan Doyle. Once the truth came out, however, the relationship between the two men froze into glacial animosity. You should pardon the expression.

I saw the Kino print of *The Man From Beyond*, but apparently a superior new print has been produced by Restored Serials. Maybe a few snippets of missing footage will close up some of the plot holes, but I have my doubts.

I am NOT a crook...

CALIGARI

(The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari)

MARCH 9, 2009

Ever feel as though the world in which you live is an illusion? An implanted memory, maybe, put there by space aliens who resemble pink neon light? An elaborate model that gets dismantled behind you every time you exit a room or move to another city? Or have you made yourself one of those little beanies of aluminum foil so the Twylobites can't broadcast their evil suggestions directly into your brain? Wait! It isn't the Twylobites, it's the United States Military! Or the Lizard People! *And no one will believe you...*

In 1919, long before Philip K. Dick was born, the German Expressionists were riffing on the same themes of paranoia and shifting realities with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

In its dreamlike opening scene, two men are sitting in a garden wherein light and darkness take on mass like an image on a psychedelic poster. The older man, with owl-staring eyes, says that spirits are all

around us; they have driven him from hearth and home, wife and children. A woman glides by like a ghost. The younger man, Francis, identifies her as his fiancée Jane. He proceeds to tell a macabre story...

The scene shifts to the garret room of a young student, Alan, who is sunk in gloom until he discovers that a traveling fair has come to his mountain village. He runs off and tells his best friend Francis, and they resolve to go to the fair the next day. Next we see the mountebank Dr. Caligari, going to the village clerk to apply for an exhibition permit.

As played by actor Werner Krauss, Caligari is malevolence personified: fat, shabby, stooping, unwashed, curiously disturbing. He wears white gloves with three black lines across the backs, just like those worn by Mickey Mouse (I'm not kidding; check out the picture). In his old-time showman's getup he looks like an evil W. C. Fields... well, an evil-*er* W. C. Fields. The clerk is rude to him, and we see a vengeful gleam in Caligari's eyes. The next morning the clerk is found dead in his bed, stabbed by persons unknown.

Cut to Francis and Alan going to the fair. Caligari is hawking his exhibit, the Somnambulist Cesare. Cesare is a living corpse with the gift of prophecy. Francis and Alan file into the tent to watch as Cesare is roused to a state of trancelike awareness. The camera pulls in for a tight close-up of Cesare. Clearly Tim Burton was exposed to this film at an early age—possibly during his fetal development—because Cesare is a rail-thin, white-faced boy with a mop of black hair, exactly like so many of the heroes in Burton's films. Slowly, Cesare opens sunken and black-shadowed eyes. Caligari challenges the audience to ask Cesare any question at all. Alan, the idiot, asks how long he has to live. Cesare tells him he will live until daybreak.

He's found dead in his bed next day, of course, stabbed by Cesare, who has crept into his house like a shadow and slipped away again. Francis suspects Caligari of having sent Cesare to commit the murder, and spends most of the rest of the film running around trying to convince the police to arrest Caligari. Cesare is sent to murder Francis's girlfriend Jane, but carries her off instead, leading the villagers on a chase through the distorted geometries of the landscape. Finally—not being in the best physical shape after having slept for twenty-three years—he keels over with heart failure and the girl escapes. Francis,

meanwhile, spots Caligari running to hide in the local lunatic asylum. It turns out that Caligari is the director of the asylum, but—having become obsessed with the case history of an 18th-century mountebank and murderer who toured Europe with a somnambulist—he has flipped out and begun living his obsession.

All is revealed, and Caligari is forced into a straitjacket and dragged screaming to a cell in his own asylum. But *then!*

We're back in the asylum, where Francis begs Jane to finally marry him. Jane, however, is on another planet and tells him that queens, alas, are not free to follow their hearts. And there in the background is Cesare, alive and harmlessly mooning over what looks like a small bouquet. And then in comes the asylum's director, and it's *Caligari*, looking bland, benign, and clean. Francis has screaming hysterics and, in a scene exactly paralleling the previous ending, is straitjacketed and dragged into a cell. Aha, says the good doctor, this poor man thinks that I am the notorious Caligari! Well, now I can begin to treat him for his delusion.

Creepy.

The film is brilliant, such a straightforward masterpiece that one is surprised to learn how haphazardly its elements fell into place. The Expressionist sets, with their weird angles and painted shadows, were created because the Decla-Bioscop studios couldn't afford anything more elaborate on their postwar budget. Of the two writers, pacifist Carl Mayer had undergone traumatic sessions with a military psychiatrist; Hans Janowitz had inadvertently witnessed a murder during a nocturnal walk in a park, without realizing what he'd seen until a girl's body was found the following day. The framing device providing the twist ending wasn't even in the original script! The producers felt that audiences would be unacceptably alarmed unless they were assured at the end that the murders had only happened in Francis's mind. And of course their twist ending only imposed an even more sinister layer of meaning on the story.

After all, we know that the shadows aren't real. There's nothing to be afraid of! Trust your politicians. Trust your policemen. And let the kindly doctor treat your delusions...

Maria... I've just met a 'bot named Maria...

THE MECHANICAL MAN

(L'Uomo Meccanico)

MARCH 16, 2009

In 1921, a beloved little silent-film comedian decided to write, direct, and star in a science fiction film. Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*? Wrong.

The comedian in question was a French vaudeville clown and acrobat named André Deed. When remembered at all, he is best remembered for a series of Italian silent comedy shorts in which he played a character called Cretinetti. *L'Uomo Meccanico* was his first and only effort as a screenwriter, as well as being the first film I have been able to track down with a genuine robot character, and so it is truly a shame that only mangled fragments exist. All that remain are a few reels of the Portuguese version, found in storage in Brazil, consisting of about 40% of the original feature. At this remove, it's hard to make any judgment on *The Mechanical Man*'s quality, but educated guesses are possible.

Deed may well have been a very funny man. His chief shtick in *The Mechanical Man* seems to have been frenzied leaping about, like Roberto Benigni at an Oscar ceremony after about thirty cans of Red Bull. His antics add nothing to the plot, which without him might have made a fairly straightforward silent thriller: Scientist invents giant robot with superpowers, gang of crooks led by a Female Adventuress (!) kills Scientist to gain control of the robot, Female Adventuress sends robot on deadly rampage, Scientist's Brother creates *other* giant robot to battle original robot. And then there's this little jumping guy stuck in here and there for comic relief. Apparently. Without the explanatory scroll-down at the beginning, though, you'd have a hard time guessing what the hell was supposed to be going on.

Which is not to say this film lacks a certain surreal charm. The robots are, yes, real robots! Unlike the one in Houdini's *Master Mystery*, considered here a few weeks back, these are not men in robot suits (I mean, they *are*, but in the context of the story they're these big sort of RC-controlled monsters) to be unmasked at the end. No Scooby-Doo cop-outs here! There's a scene near the end in which the evil robot is chasing a car and no less than three separate special effects are used, with sublimely cheesy results. First some speeded-up footage of the robot walking is superimposed behind the car; then, in a long shot, what appears to be a clumsy animation of the robot frantically waddling along; finally the robot is being *towed* behind the car on a trailer, only partially screened by smoke and firework effects.

None of this, though, can give you any idea of the awesome, the fabulous, the superlative incoherence of *The Mechanical Man*. This poor ruined film has become a work of art distinct from Deed's original creation, a fabulous découpage of unrelated images and bizarre scenes to bemuse and delight the viewer, especially if the viewer has indulged in a mild controlled substance first.

Here's a woman in a checkered Hollie Hobbie outfit and some sort of bondage mask, shooting up in a prison cell! Here she is naked in a hospital bed, slyly pouring ether on the floor so she can set it and her bed on fire when the nurses leave! Here's what appears to be the Olympic event for Men in Hats Shoving Each Other! Here's a dead

bulldog! Here's the robot throwing somebody's armoire off the top of a castle! Here's the comic relief, shooting at the participants in a bicycle race! Here's a guy hanging off a cliff-top tree by one arm! He lets go and drops, to land next to a gypsy sitting beside her campfire! Here's a horse with its tail cut off! Here's the comic relief dressed as Lord Nelson (I *think*) on a motorcycle, being chased by a car bearing a police detective in drag as Little Bo Peep! Or maybe he's disguised as Marie Antoinette.

I swear to God. All this *and* a climax in which two giant robots duke it out in the Paris Opera House! Although that part isn't as good as it sounds. But really, if you are in an even faintly altered state of consciousness, this forgotten cinematic gem will have you weeping with laughter. It's a thousand pities it wasn't rediscovered during the '60s; it might have become a college campus Midnight Matinee classic.

Where, you ask breathlessly, can you find this cinematic treasure? Alpha Video has released it on a DVD double bill with the 1922 *The Headless Horseman*. That one stars the great American humorist Will Rogers as a rather unconvincing Ichabod Crane. It was the first film shot using the panchromatic negative process, which gives it some neat day-for-night scenes. For sheer dadaist enchantment, though, it can't hold a candle to *L'Uomo Meccanico*.

Look, I don't want to hurt their feelings, but I didn't order any exotic dancers....

AELITA, QUEEN OF MARS

(Aelita: Queen of Mars)

MARCH 23, 2009

Greetings, Comrades! This week's feature is *Aelita: Queen of Mars*, glorious Soviet silent science fictional epic from 1924. Based on Alexei Tolstoy's novel and directed by Yakov Protazanov, it was a smash hit with heroic Soviet workers everywhere in its day. Later, when its true message finally sank in on the Fearless Leader, it was banned and consigned to the reactionary outer darkness. Which is a shame, because *Aelita* is a lot of fun.

It's been called the first full-length film about space travel, but that's arguable, because very little of the film actually deals with the whole space capsule business. In fact, most of the first hour is a series of propagandistic vignettes of heroic workers trying to rebuild Russia after the revolution. This sounds deadly dull but it's actually sort of engaging, because it's presented as a little soap opera following the Russian heroes (and a couple of backsliding villains) as they go about

their daily lives. You can see at once why this was so popular; here the Russians are shown as they must have liked to imagine themselves, cheerfully working toward a better tomorrow in the face of present-day privation, united and uncomplaining. Sort of like a revolutionaries' version of *Mrs. Miniver* or *Since You Went Away*.

Aelita opens with a nicely economical bit of storytelling. A mysterious message is telegraphed to receiver stations the world over. We see the Japanese receive it, puzzle over its three meaningless words, but do nothing. Next, a cigar-smoking imperialist British lackey immerses himself in a newspaper while his black telegraph operator takes down the message and hands it to him. He glances at the three words, then crumples the paper and tosses it aside. Now three Russian engineers receive the message. They don't know what it means either, but two of them, Los and Spiridinov, are convinced it's a message from Mars, and they promptly begin designing a spaceship that will take them to the Red Planet.

Materials to build it are a little thin on the ground, though, what with food and everything else being tightly rationed, so for a while the project remains a pipe dream. Enter a pair of baddies, sort of counterrevolutionary versions of Boris Badenov and Natasha Fatale. Yelena seduces Spiridinov and gets him to desert Russia. Erlich uses his smooth wiles (also white bread and black market chocolates) in an attempt to seduce Los's wife. In a subplot, heroic soldier of the revolution Gusev falls in love with selfless revolutionary hospital nurse Masha.

Wondering when we'll get to the science fiction bit? So was I.

But, at last, the point of view shifts to Mars and we get our first look at Aelita, bride of Tuskub, Ruler of Mars! And she's...boy, she's really...er...something. She appears to have three breasts. She sort of has that raccoon thing going that Daryl Hannah's character painted on herself in *Blade Runner*. Aelita's costumes—in fact, all the Martians' costumes—are jaw-dropping constructivist metallic and glass ensembles. Your heart goes out to her maidservant Ihoshka, obliged to wear these steel spider-leg bloomers in which she walks bowlegged so as to avoid puncturing a femoral artery and *still* maintains a cheerful and impish demeanor. We learn that Aelita is two-timing King Tuskub

with handsome Gor, Guardian of Energy, with whom she sneaks off for a somewhat chilly rendezvous at the Tower of Radiant Energy. Gor has invented a telescope with which events can be observed on neighboring planet Earth. Aelita demands to watch the Earthlings and sees distant Los and his wife locked in a passionate kiss.

And here it is, B-movie fans: the original moment when a Space Woman is overwhelmed by the mating rituals of we Earth-creatures, and decides she *must know more*. Aelita wants Los, even though Los is one of those sad-faced Russians who really does resemble Dobby the House Elf. However, she can't have him yet. There is still nearly an hour of drama on Earth before Los, Gusev, and a comic detective manage to blast off and get to Mars. Once there, Los falls into Aelita's embrace and Gusev, like the heroic Bolshevik he is, rouses the Martian working class to overthrow the decadent monarchy and form a Martian Soviet Socialist Republic! Aelita switches sides and joins them as their leader! Ah, but can she be trusted...?

You may be thinking to yourself that *Aelita*'s plot borrows heavily here from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, but in fact *Aelita* was made first. And, just as it's leading you about where you thought it was going, the plot doubles back and twists upon itself in a startling manner. The casual viewer may fling the remote at the screen in disgust, but further reflection will reveal that *Aelita*'s message isn't as straightforward as it appears, at all. You will want to watch it a second time to notice the subtext, or rather several subtexts. Suffice it to say there was a reason this film was later suppressed by Stalin's censors.

I can only find one available version of *Aelita: Queen of Mars*, the print offered on DVD by Image Entertainment. It's in reasonably good shape, although some scenes appear to have gone missing, most notably the iconic moment when Ihoshka seems to be flirting with the Court Astronomer. The DVD is available from Netflix but also can be viewed on demand at Amazon, if you just can't wait to sample this masterpiece of post-revolutionary doublespeak.

You got a call from someone named 3PO. He says you gave him up for adoption thirty years ago?

METROPOLIS

(Metropolis)

MARCH 30, 2009

If you've only seen one silent science fiction film, it was probably *Metropolis*.

And yet it would be safe to say that almost no one living has seen Fritz Lang's classic as it was originally shown in 1927. A very expensive commercial flop, it was withdrawn from circulation immediately after its first run, drastically cut down, and rereleased for the foreign market with further changes. The American distributors actually threw out the German script and hired writer Channing Pollock to create an entirely new story using bits of the remaining footage. With each metamorphosis the film became more fragmented, more incoherent, and by the late '60s was a thorough mess. Campus midnight film festivals ran it for audiences who partook of controlled substances, the better to appreciate its Ohmygod visuals, but found they'd made a ghastly mistake when the Seven Deadly Sins came to life onscreen.

Over the years since then, several attempts have been made to restore the film to its former state. Until June of 2008 the best restoration was offered by ever-reliable Kino, with only about a quarter of the original footage missing. Now, however, a complete print has been found in Argentina. It's in deplorable condition, but restoration is underway and a new release may be available this year or next.

Unfortunately, none of this changes the fact that *Metropolis* stinks.

Yes, the visuals are brilliant, inspiring everyone from Ridley Scott to Madonna, to say nothing of the creators of *Superman* and *Final Fantasy VII* and manga too numerous to count and obviously let's not forget George Lucas and...you get the idea. It's a seminal film. Certain images are unforgettable. You should certainly watch it if you get the chance.

It still stinks.

Fritz Lang himself, looking back at the end of a long career, detested it. No less an authority than H. G. Wells picked it to pieces in a critical review. The problem isn't the acting, because there is only one really, really bad performance, and it certainly isn't the cinematography or set design, which are excellent. It is *bad science fiction.*

There's this giant futuristic city, see? All designed by one man, Joh Fredersen, who rules it as a sort of CEO God. Everything above ground is glittering Art Deco Moderne and towers to the stars, except for a medieval cathedral and the home of the inventor Rotwang, which also appears to have been transported from the Middle Ages. (These last function as emblems of the sacred and profane respectively, although oddly the cathedral has no saints on display—only statues of Death and the Seven Deadly Sins).

Underground is the Workers' City, where drab men labor painfully at giant inefficient machines that keep both cities, above and below, running. Another inexplicable relic of the past—in this case an early Christian catacomb, complete with moldering skulls—sits down there amid the cheerless Le Corbusier–style apartment blocks.

Fredersen's city apparently produces nothing. There's no economy in evidence other than in the Yoshiwara, a decadent district of cocktail lounges and brothels where rich boys play. This seems to be where they go when they become bored by the Immortal Gardens of the Club of

the Sons, a sunlit rooftop playground full of gymnasiums, fountains, peacocks, and quaintly costumed pleasure-dolls. There don't appear to be any Daughters in this upper city, or Wives either. Just whores. Before you grit your teeth, my sisters, I would like to point out that Thea von Harbou wrote the screenplay, and she seems to have been completely unconscious of its feminist shortcomings.

We meet Joh Fredersen's son Freder romping in the Garden of the Sons. He is as innocent as a lamb and dressed all in white to underscore the point. In the midst of his thoughtless fun, the elevator doors open to admit a crowd of ragged workers' children, led by the saintly heroine Maria (and how in hell they all got past Security is never explained). Maria has brought the kiddies up to watch the frolic, solemnly explaining to them that "these are your brothers." How this is supposed to incite anything but envy and smoldering resentment in their little proletarian minds, I don't know, but it certainly has an effect on Freder, who is horrified to learn there is a World of Which he Knows Not.

You can guess, can't you, that he sneaks down to the lower city, is horrified by what he sees, and leads a rebellion against the cruelty of his father's corporate reign? Not so fast. Freder isn't a rebel, or a leader either. He goes down there, all right, and is duly horrified, but he faints and weeps and has visions. He swaps clothes with one of the workers so he can feel their pain. One ten-hour shift reduces him to a crucifixion metaphor. He staggers off to the Catacombs to hear Maria preach a sermon on the Tower of Babel and promise the workers that between the Head (Fredersen) and the Hands (them) the Heart must mediate, and a Mediator is coming soon. Freder falls ecstatically in love with Maria. She, too, with him. There are more painful examples of bad acting in silent film, I'm sure, but Freder's raptures are right up there in the top 5.

Meanwhile, Joh Fredersen suspects his workers are up to something and goes off to Rotwang's laboratory to ask him for a solution. Rotwang is, for most of the film, a great character, the grim mad ancestor of Dr. Strangelove, sullen and brooding as Beethoven. But get this: Joh once wooed Rotwang's one true love away from him, she *died* giving birth to Joh's son Freder, and *Rotwang is the guy Fredersen comes to for advice*

in times of crisis.

Rotwang has invented a mechanical woman (always referred to as the Mechanical Man) to replace his dead love. Fredersen, seeing her (him? it?), wants his workers all replaced by mechanical ones, but then, after learning of Maria's Friendly Gospel Hour in the Crypt, changes his mind: he demands that Rotwang remodel the prototype to look exactly like Maria, only she'll be EVIL, and programmed to persuade the workers to revolt. That will then give Joh an excuse to *crush them!*

Wait a minute, you say, he has a chance to replace his only somewhat disgruntled laborers with uncomplaining robots, allowing him to solve his problem with a whole lot of pink slips...and instead he incites a rebellion in which the workers on whom his city depends will all perish, *before he has anything with which to replace them?* Yeah.

You'll have to watch *Metropolis* to see how it all comes out. Try not to puke at its absurd and naive political philosophy or the way in which its cotton-candy Christian message is consistently undercut with horrific images of Death and sin. Or the way Good Maria is a plaster saint and victim, or the way Evil Robot Maria's evil sex dance is run at too many frames per second, so her frenzied jitterings are anything but sexy. Or the way the workers are shown to be really a bunch of morons after all. Or Freder, in any scene in which he appears.

Don't try to think about what you see at all, in fact. Just lie back and enjoy the astonishing feast for the eyes. And the ears, too: Forget Giorgio Moroder's soundtrack—find the Kino version with the original 1927 score by Gottfried Huppertz. *Metropolis* is a gloriously stupid spectacle, an hallucination, a fatally flawed masterpiece, an improbable survivor. Experience it!

But not, I beg you, in an altered state. Especially during the Seven Deadly Sins bit.

He doesn't get it from MY side of the family, Gladys!

THE LOST WORLD

(The Lost World)

APRIL 6, 2009

1925's *The Lost World* is...really, everything a dinosaur movie should be. Like a dinosaur, this classic was once extinct, too, existing as mere fragmentary footage and stills, but cinephile fossil-hunters have painstakingly excavated bits and pieces from obscure archives and assembled them into a nearly complete animal. And what a beast it is!

Based on the 1912 novel by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the film's script adds a love interest, scraps Doyle's battle between a tribe of Amazonian Indians and a tribe of ape-men, and puts in waaaay more dinosaurs. This is a very good thing indeed. On the other hand, they change Doyle's heroic black character Zambo into a grotesque clown played by a white man in blackface. That, however, is pretty much the only painful moment in the film. The rest of it is a jaw-dropping delight. Especially the dinosaurs.

Even before we get to the dinosaurs, however, *The Lost World* is fun.

Handsome Young Dope Edward Malone proposes to his Betty-Boopoid sweetie, who refuses him on the grounds that only a man who has faced *danger* can win her heart. He ends up volunteering for an expedition to be led by the insanely hot-tempered Professor Challenger, played with scary vigor by Wallace Beery. Challenger claims there are living dinosaurs in the Amazon jungle, and he's ready to break the jaw of any other scientist who disagrees. In case you think men of science never behaved this way, just Google "Cope vs. Marsh" or "Bone Wars" sometime.

Why is Challenger so certain there are dinosaurs? He has the journal of a lost explorer, Maple White, who discovered an isolated plateau high in the Venezuelan jungle. The journal was brought back by White's daughter, the only English survivor of the expedition. The journal, like Henry Jones Sr.'s Grail Diary, is full of sketches and scientific notes, only the sketches are of dinosaurs instead of grail trivia. Another image borrowed by later filmmakers is the charming map showing our heroes' progress, with a tiny animated ship skittering like a cockroach from England to South America.

So the party arrives in the Jungle (this was before rain forests): Challenger, Malone, Miss White, a big-game hunter named Roxton, a fussy little professor who came along to prove Challenger a liar, Zambo the Offensive Caricature, and an equally offensive Cockney caricature. I should, in all fairness, point out that both the Cockney and Zambo turn out to be heroes, and if this film were made today political correctness would demand that Roxton be portrayed as an eco-villain instead of the kind and gentlemanly fellow he is in Doyle's story. Perhaps it's best if you just pretend you're watching this in 1925, OK?

Right away, the omens are good: our heroes spot a pterodactyl (actually a pteranodon) flying above the high plateau. They climb a cliff, cross to the plateau via a fallen tree bridge, and are promptly trapped there when a brontosaurus throws the fallen tree down the abyss. Hijinks ensue. In addition to all the dinosaurs threatening them, there is an ape-man resembling a sasquatch with orthodontal problems who pals around with a little chimpanzee. But let me, right here and now, put my hand on my heart and say that master stop-motion animator Willis O'Brien was a god walking this earth in ten-

foot strides, like his creations for *The Lost World*.

Jaded by today's CGI spectacles, you may watch these little clay figures stump around their little rear-projection model world and be unimpressed. Eighty-four years ago, however, audiences saw them for the first time and *believed*. This is not an exaggeration. When some of the first completed footage of the models was shown without explanation on one of Doyle's lecture tours in 1923, there were people who actually thought Doyle had somehow obtained the images of real dinosaurs by mediumistic means. The *New York Times* opined that the dinosaurs, *if faked* (!), were masterpieces.

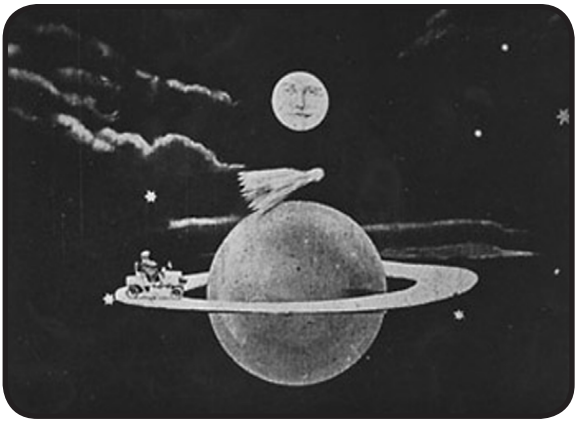
The most magnificent set piece, involving the eruption of a volcano and the subsequent lava flow and fires (and fleeing dinosaurs) was created on a single table set 75 feet long and twice as wide. If you know *anything* about stop-motion animation you will be astounded by the sheer scale of O'Brien's achievement in the thousands of tiny adjustments to dozens of dinosaur models in one frame, intercut with live-action footage. And I defy you not to shiver when our heroes, crouched around their campfire, look up and see a pair of fire-reflecting eyes advancing on them through the primeval darkness...at the level of the treetops.

Watch *The Lost World* and you will understand that without its pioneering SFX achievements and unforgettable images, there would have been no *King Kong* eight years later (or any subsequent remakes), no *Mighty Joe Young*, no Rite of Spring sequence in *Fantasia*, no *Valley of Gwangi* or possibly any other Ray Harryhausen film, no *Jurassic Parks I*, *II*, or *III*...if you watch closely you'll realize that even the famous hoaxed picture of the Loch Ness Monster was probably inspired by one particular shot in this film.

Sure, there are anachronisms, with dinosaurs from different eras coexisting on the plateau, and for that matter what's that African chimpanzee doing in Venezuela? It just adds to the charm. The acting isn't bad for its time, either, and the casting is perfect, especially Beery as Challenger. Bessie Love's character is a fragile flower and love object only, but, like I said, it was 1925. It would be easily another fifty years before women in films started grabbing the guns and shooting the monsters themselves. If you can deal with that, and with Zambo, you'll

enjoy the heck out of *The Lost World*.

Now, be advised: just as the same skeleton can wear its skull on one end and be called a brontosaurus, but wear its skull on the other end and be called an apatosaur, there are two modern restorations of this film and they differ from each other in certain respects. Critical judgment tends to favor the version put together by David Shepard and released through Image Entertainment in 2001, but the George Eastman House version put together in 1996 is also worth watching. You just can't have too many dinosaurs, can you?



Interplanetary Motorcar Badminton: The Early Years

THE ? MOTORIST

(The ? Motorist)

APRIL 13, 2009

It's back to the cinematic stone age this week with a rarity from 1906, *The ? Motorist*. This little British trick film is bizarre and fun, but also worthy of note for the number of its connections with early science fiction films that were and that might have been. Spoilers follow, in case that bothers you in a film less than five minutes long.

The ? Motorist begins with a couple in classic 1906 motoring regalia, swathed up in dusters and goggles in the best steampunk fashion, the lady's hat held on by a scarf tied under her chin. They rattle along the street in their unholy chariot. A policeman steps out to stop them. They don't stop. He ends up on the hood of the car, and a moment later is thrown off and rolled over, with a nice bit of cutting to match the live actor with the sacrificial dummy. Our Motorists drive on, as expressionless as robots. The policeman picks himself up and runs off in hot pursuit.

He chases them down a dead-end road, but the Motorists don't stop: they head straight for the public house at the end of the street and proceed to drive *up* its wall, as astonished customers run out and crane back their heads to stare after them. Now the Motorists are driving through the clouds! Now they're in outer space, motoring through the stars! Now they circle the Man in the Moon, who has clearly had some great reconstructive surgery after his first visit by explorers from Earth. Next we see the Motorists being towed by the tail of a comet to Saturn, where they use its rings as a racetrack before plunging back down through the clouds to Earth.

Meanwhile, in a courtroom, what looks to be the trial of a clown is in progress. Apparently it's not going so well for the accused, who is gesturing angrily at the judge, when suddenly the Motorists crash through the ceiling and speed away. Everyone but the clown runs after them. At the end of a village lane the motorcar stalls. The gentleman Motorist gets out to crank the starter, just as the justice, police, and solicitors arrive. He is swiftly apprehended, but abruptly there *is* no juggernaut motorcar—only a horse and carriage, driven by a harmless farmer and his wife. In a *These-Aren't-the-Droids-You're-Looking-For* moment, the astonished men release the farmer, who climbs up beside his wife. The carriage starts off and immediately morphs back into the motorcar. The demon Motorists make their escape!

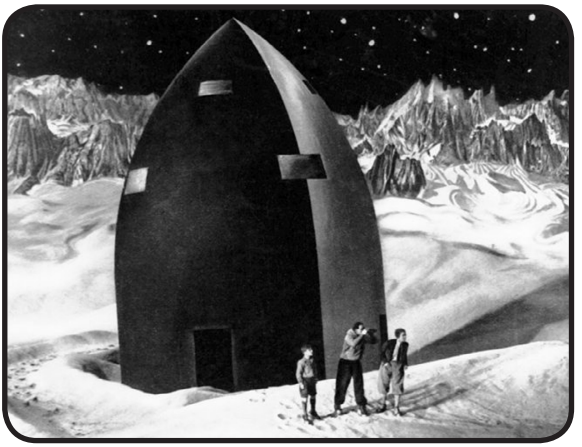
Who *are* these people? Robots? Space aliens in disguise? You half expect the TARDIS to pop up on a street corner in front of them. In fact, whoever's producing scripts for the next *Doctor Who* might give *The ? Motorist* a viewing next time they want to do a steampunk episode.

The ? Motorist was produced by R. W. Paul, one of the great pioneers of Victorian cinema, an inventor and electrical-instrument maker who improved on Edison's Kinetoscope and started a sideline business of making and showing films in 1895. Exhibited at fairs, seaside pavilions, and music halls, these little novelties were full of gleeful invention and fantasy. Georges Méliès, doing the same thing in France, started out with a camera built by R. W. Paul. Paul even filed a patent application for what would perhaps have been the first mixed-media science fiction spectacle, inspired by H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. His plan was to give his audience the illusion of being transported through time and

space. This never materialized, having no doubt proved too difficult to pull off—especially in a fair tent, assailed by the smells of sea air, cotton candy, and donkey rides—but what a special-effects extravaganza it might have been!

Paul got out of show business fairly early, but Walter Booth, who had directed *The ? Motorist*, remade it a few years later in 1911, when he had gone to work for another cinema pioneer, Charles Urban. The remake was titled *The Automatic Motorist*, and now the plot involved a couple driven on their honeymoon by a clockwork automaton chauffeur. This time out the motorcar went not only into space but under the sea. *The Automatic Motorist* still exists, in the collection of the British Film Institute, but to the best of my knowledge it has not been made available for viewing on DVD or download (If I'm mistaken, please advise). It appears, though, that its clockwork automaton driver beat André Deed's *The Mechanical Man* to the title of first robot on film by ten years.

The ? Motorist may be found on Volume Two of Kino's *The Movies Begin* and is well worth checking out. Its use of cut frame, miniatures, and double-exposure animation is clever, and if you spot that bit of fishing line pulling the tiny motorcar on its wobbly way through the clouds, well, be charitable. Its journey through time has lasted a hundred and three years to date, and it shows no sign of ever breaking down.



Look, Tintin, we'll get you another dog when we get back to Earth. Just stop crying.

FRAU IM MOND

(Frau im Mond)

APRIL 20, 2009

1929's *Frau im Mond* (*Woman on the Moon*) is a landmark film, mentioned in every book on science fiction cinema. It's possible to argue that Fritz Lang shaped our present world with it. Yet its brassier sister, the art-deco political fairy tale *Metropolis*, has stolen all its thunder. This is a shame, for *Frau im Mond* stands as the bridge between Méliès and Kubrick, the uncannily accurate prediction of our first exploration of space. You owe it to yourself to see this one.

Mind you, for the first 73 minutes you will have to endure a spy melodrama, with the sort of human-interest backstory that film producers insist on inserting to this day. It's actually not that bad an experience. The acting is good, the characterizations well drawn, and the sets evoke the tidy bourgeois world in which *Steppenwolf* begins. Helius, a wealthy engineer, has been drawing up practical plans for a rocket that will travel to the moon and back. This has led him to

neglect his romantic pursuit of Friede, a student of astronomy who is part of his scientific team. Helius's assistant Windegger steps in and proposes to Friede, and when she accepts, Helius gloomily decides to make the journey to the moon himself.

First, though, he visits an old friend, Professor Mannfeldt. The professor has been living in toothless penury in a garret since 1895, when he ruined his scientific reputation by announcing that the moon contained vast gold reserves. Today we know this isn't the case, but there was no reason to believe otherwise in the era before gas spectrometers. The professor warns Helius that someone has been trying to break into his garret and steal his work. He gives his manuscript to Helius and begs him to keep it safe. Helius goes home and loses not only the manuscript but all his own project notes and models, in two neatly stage-managed robberies.

He is then contacted by a mysterious American calling himself Walter Turner, purporting to be from Chicago. Mr. Turner, eerily similar in appearance to William Randolph Hearst, is the dirty-tricks agent for an international cartel of financiers who want control of any gold found on the moon. He informs Helius that the moon voyage will be made on the financiers' terms or not at all. Refusal to meet their demands will result in Helius's work being destroyed. Because all they ask is for Turner to be included on the mission, Helius agrees.

At this point we meet young Gustav, the twelve-year-old son of Helius's chauffeur. Gustav has a knapsack full of science fiction comics. Gustav dreams of exploring space. Can you guess that Gustav will stow away on the rocket, when it takes off? I could, too. I was still surprised to meet this particular SFnal archetype in a silent film from the Weimar Republic.

The official mission roster will include Helius, Turner, Professor Manfeldt and his pet mouse, and Friede and Windegger. Nattily dressed in shawl-collared sweaters and other early aviator gear, they board the rocket and *now* at last comes the big set piece: the Launch!

And this is the point at which I leaned forward in my seat and began repeating *oh my God* for about the next twenty minutes.

I was born in 1952. I remember the Mercury 7 and the black-and-white TV images from Cape Canaveral. I remember the gray lunar

surface scrolling past beneath the *Eagle* as it came in for its landing in 1969. But here it is in 1929, *just the same.* The enormous gantry rolling into place, the backwards countdown from 10, the three-stage rocket dropping its segments until only the space capsule flies on, the astronauts attempting to pour liquids and scooping up the resultant floating globules, the capsule reversing itself for its moon landing, the bubble-headed space suits.

It's a bit anticlimactic after they land, because now the things they *didn't* get right take prominence. The moon has a breathable atmosphere and people can stroll about on its surface, perfectly comfortable in their shawl-collared sweaters. The explorers plan to find water with a *dowsing rod*. There are bubbling puddles of moon-mud. And the plot, with its burdensome lovers' triangle and treacherous villain and crazy old professor and bright kid, begins to resemble a *Lost in Space* episode. I can't warm to Friede, even though she is an intelligent woman-in-the-sciences, because she still functions as little more than a romantic object. Scriptwriter Thea von Harbou consistently undercut any nascent feminism by making her heroines marble images of spiritual perfection. There's really no particular reason to call it *Woman on the Moon*, either.

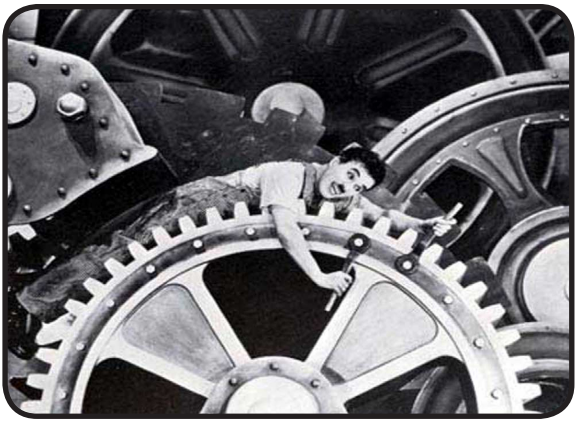
It doesn't matter. That so much was gotten right, forty years before humanity finally made it to Luna, is astonishing. It gives rise to bitter reflection on how much sooner mankind might have gone into space if not for Hitler. The primary science advisor for *Frau im Mond* was rocketeer Hermann Oberth, one of whose protégés was a bright boy named Wernher von Braun. Von Braun was a great fan of this film, and went so far as to paint its logo on the first successful V-2 rocket. You have to wonder how much else of the film's imagery shaped his thinking about what our first attempt at a moon landing would be like. It's a fact that the backwards countdown to launch was invented *for this film*, to draw out the suspense. How many kids, poised at the top of the playground jungle gym from 1961 on, counted out "5-4-3-2-1-BLAST OFF!" before jumping into space and skinning their knees in the sandbox?

Ironically, *Frau im Mond*, for all its sleek modern look, for all its technical brilliance, was a box-office failure, largely due to the fact that

it had become a relic of the past: the era of silent films had come to an end. The public wanted to see talkies.

And most of those bright German kids with knapsacks full of science fiction comics were denied their shiny future and cemented into an ugly stratum of history instead. The Nazis had the film withdrawn from circulation and destroyed the models.

But you can watch the Kino Video restoration on DVD, and you should. If *The Right Stuff* floated your boat, *Frau im Mond* will bring tears to your eyes.



I'm on a 12-hour shift! I just lost my medical benefits! Whee!

MODERN TIMES

(Modern Times)

APRIL 27, 2009

If Charles Dickens had written *Metropolis*, the result might have been something like *Modern Times*. In a way, it accomplishes everything *Metropolis* sought to do, without the overblown symbolism, and delivers bleak truth rather than pseudo-Christian bromides.

Filmed in 1936, Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* is the very last of the authentic silent films. There are recorded sound effects and mechanical voices, and one song in improvised gibberish, but all spoken dialogue by humans is silent and represented with screen cards. Chaplin was deliberately creating an anachronism, a wistful farewell to the Little Tramp. *Modern Times* is also a masterpiece of social science fiction.

Many of the opening images echo those in *Metropolis*. A vast clock face fills the screen; then we see multitudes of shift workers reporting to a vast modern factory. We see a grim-jawed Corporate President

who bears a certain resemblance to Joh Fredersen, idly playing with a jigsaw puzzle at his desk. When he can't make the pieces fit he discards the puzzle, takes his meds, and turns on the closed-circuit TV so he can spy on his factory workers. Now and again he barks an order into a microphone, urging his employees to speed up production.

We see an assembly line on which the Little Tramp as Factory Worker is laboring at a frantic pace, wrench in either hand, tightening pairs of bolts. He can't work at the speed of a robot and so is pulled into the machinery. Production shuts down while he is hauled out unhurt. His foreman, noticing that he seems to have a problem with repetitive motion tics, sends him to clock out for a break. No sooner does he relax in the toilet with a cigarette than the Corporate President spots him on the CC TV (yes, there are spy cameras even in the john) and orders him to get back to work. Next, as the workers break for lunch, a group of salesmen attempt to demonstrate a new automatic-feeding device that will improve efficiency by eliminating the need for a lunch break: food can be stuffed down the worker's throats *as they continue to work on the assembly line!* The machine is tested on Chaplin's Factory Worker, but suffice to say there are some design flaws. Having been doused with hot soup, choked, shaken, and obliged to spit out steel bolts, the Factory Worker returns to his shift, where things go from bad to worse. He goes berserk, in a brilliantly choreographed sequence, and is hauled off to a hospital, gaily spurting oil in all directions.

Upon being released from the hospital, the now-jobless Little Tramp is himself like one of the discarded puzzle pieces: he doesn't fit anywhere. His gentlemanly attitude works against him: picking up a red flag that has fallen from a passing truck, he is mistakenly arrested as the leader of a Socialist parade and thrown in jail. Here a prisoner stashes his cocaine in a salt shaker in the mess hall, and the Tramp inadvertently partakes. Wildly coked up, he puts down a prison uprising single-handedly and is rewarded with model prisoner perks. Life is good until he's dumped back onto the street again. He gets a short-lived job at a shipyard, losing it with one of the neater sight gags ever filmed.

Now we meet the Gamine, a Poor Child of the Streets. I was prepared to wince, but Paulette Goddard is great in the role. We first

meet her defiantly stealing bananas from a shipment at the docks and tossing them to other starving kids. Her eyes blaze. You can believe this girl will do whatever it takes to survive, especially after her jobless father is killed in a street demonstration and the authorities show up to take her little sisters into custody. Stealing bread, she is caught; the Tramp intervenes and chivalrously attempts to take the blame but only succeeds in getting them both in trouble.

Escaping to what looks like a half-empty real-estate subdivision, the pair watch a suburban couple in front of their little home, with the fond wife sending her husband off to his job. The Tramp and the Gamine fantasize what life might be like in a little home of their own, until a policeman moves them on. The rest of the film involves their attempts to achieve that little home, and they sort of manage it for a while in a tiny abandoned shed. Some pains are taken to show that their relationship is a chaste one: we are shown that the Tramp sleeps gallantly alone in a lean-to *outside* the shed. He is a gentleman, after all.

Blameless, innocent, and well-intentioned as he is, he can't get steady employment and keeps winding up in jail through no fault of his own. The Gamine is brave and resourceful, however, and finds new ways to make ends meet. Just when it appears they have both finally found successful employment, however...

Ironically enough, this is the film that got Chaplin in trouble with the House Committee on Un-American Activities. It was assumed that to criticize Industry was to be a Communist. Chaplin indignantly denied the charge and left America for Switzerland, where he lived out his days in peace.

Modern Times is a hopeful film, for all its Dickensian subject matter, airy, even light-hearted. It mocks a gleaming future that requires us to be interchangeable machine parts, with every human quality trimmed off to make us fit into the system. It can't be said that this is a film about the triumph of the individual, even so; Chaplin was too wise a man to assert that innocence and gallantry will beat the system. His hero and heroine can't change the world in which they find themselves; no revolution, religion, or social service will improve their lot. "Buck up—Never Say Die! We'll Get Along!" says the Tramp, with the final title card. All they have is hope and each other, as they walk away

together down the road into the sunrise.

We are walking beside them, just now. The big gleaming machine broke down. We are redundant, puzzle pieces that no longer fit. Homes, jobs, health care are dreams we may be lucky enough to maintain—or we may not. All we can really do about it is hope for the best, work to survive, and trust that we'll get along.

If you must know, I'm thirty-nine.

L'ATLANTIDE

(L'Atlantide)

MAY 4, 2009

Well, this was a surprise!

L'Atlantide (English title: *The Queen of Atlantis*) dates from 1921 and has been remade a surprising number of times for what seems on the surface like pretty unpromising material. G. W. Pabst had a go at it in 1932, producing not one but three different versions for different markets. An American version was produced in 1949 as a vehicle for Maria Montez. A sword-and-sandals version was done in Italy, replacing the French colonial heroes with Hercules and Androcles. Still another version was shot at Cinecittà in 1992.

Factor in a plot involving a deathless queen residing in a lost city in the desert (yup, just like in Rider Haggard's *She*) and you're liable to conclude that *L'Atlantide* is a prime candidate for Cheesy Movie Night. I did; I slipped it into the DVD player out of a sense of duty, and settled down grimly determined to endure watching it so you, gentle reader,

wouldn't have to. But any time a film is repeatedly remade, there's a reason.

This is a surprisingly good movie.

Let's get the plagiarism issue out of the way first. *L'Atlantide* is based on the 1919 novel of the same name by Pierre Benoit. Benoit was, in fact, accused by a literary critic of knocking off Haggard's 1886 novel, *She*. A closer examination of the facts shows that Benoit had never read Haggard's novel, which had not at that time been translated into French, and drew for his own book on legends he had heard while serving in North Africa. And apart from that deathless queen business, the whole feel of *L'Atlantide* is different, at least in Jacques Feyder's 1921 adaptation. Legionnaires with secret sorrows, lines of camels on the dunes, enigmatic tribesmen, shimmering heat, remote outposts... man, has this film got atmosphere.

You need a high tolerance for old-fashioned storytelling, though. I have, so I was able to enjoy the deliberate (not to say glacial) pace at which the story unfolded. A desert patrol finds a lost French officer, Saint-Avit, the only survivor of an exploratory party that set out months earlier. While raving in his illness, he says some things that suggest he might have murdered the other expedition member, Captain Morhange. His fellow officers are willing to chalk it up to delirium, but the rumor gets around, and we learn that Captain Morhange was a saintly fellow beloved by all, celibate since the death of his wife and in fact planning on entering the priesthood.

Now a pariah in the Officer's Mess, Saint-Avit takes leave and goes home to France. But them burning sands are calling, apparently, because after a few weeks in Paris he turns right around and heads back to North Africa. He gets himself assigned to the most distant outpost imaginable. The only other white officer stationed there, Lt. Ferrières, is desperately curious to know what really happened. So one night, as the long shadows stretch across the dunes and a servant in a fez tops up their Pernod, Saint-Avit conjures up a massive flashback...

I was really getting into this, in case you hadn't guessed. I loved the cinematography that captured the clear blazing desert light, and the wide-angle shots of mounted Legionnaires on the horizon, and all that bygone-era exoticism. I loved the tinted title cards with their 1920s

Moroccan style. Atlantis, hell; *this* is really a lost world.

Anyway. Saint-Avit explains that he and Captain Morhange rode out together and came to an oasis at which a patrol had been massacred by Tuareg tribesmen some time before. Saint-Avit's guide Bou-Djema, in fact, was the only *known* survivor, although the young French officer leading the patrol was carried off alive by the Tuaregs. Our heroes rode on from the fateful spot and shortly thereafter rescued an elderly Tuareg who had been robbed and left to die. No good deed goes unpunished, however: the old man had participated in the massacre at the oasis, riding away with the bound and struggling young officer. Bou-Djema recognized him but was poisoned by the old man before he could spill the couscous. The old actor portraying the Tuareg, Abd-el-Kader Ben Ali, does a marvelous job with his role, calmly malign and implacable as he lures the two officers into his trap...

Here the film takes a left turn into kinky sexual fantasy. The Tuareg is the procurer for Queen Antinéa, immortal ruler of the survivors of Atlantis. She has a chamber containing 120 niches, one for each of her successive lovers. She has gone through 53 of them, producing 53 macabre gold-plated corpses. When she finally fills niche No. 120, er, "Antinéa will sit atop a throne in the center of the cave and rest forever." I should hope so. And, oh no! The insatiable queen has developed a taste for handsome European officers! Especially Frenchmen! And, to make matters worse, she is enthralled by Captain Morhange, who is determinedly chaste, whereas Saint-Avit falls under her spell willingly! You know how this has to end, right?

Unfortunately, although Queen Antinéa is supposed to be a deathless beauty no man can resist (except Morhange), the actress chosen for the part was a bit long in the tooth and sort of overweight and...well, it isn't true, as one critic said, that "there is one great actor in this film, that is the sand." The sand does put in a better performance than Queen Antinéa, however.

But there are some interesting subsidiary characters, including the old Archivist of Atlantis and Antinéa's poor little secretary Tanit-Zerga, once a desert princess in her own right but now, alas, a mere slave. It's the sort of tragicomic role that might have been handed to Gilda Radner once upon a time, with more backstory accorded her than

anyone else in the film. I also enjoyed a scene in which the ladies of the court gleefully open crates brought to them by caravan, containing cosmetics from Paris and modern (circa 1921) fashion magazines.

Sadly, the ending is more than a bit improbable, because it takes a hell of a lot of suspension of disbelief to imagine Queen Antinéa's creepy charms could haunt a man. Even so, this proto–Indiana Jones yarn was a staggeringly popular success in its day, running for a full year at its original cinema; I don't believe any other film matched that record until *Star Wars: A New Hope* broke records at Grauman's Chinese.

And, be advised, this is a *long* film. Prepare yourself with some well-iced mint tea or a glass of Pernod. Don't start watching late at night if you have to go to work the next day, because, for all *L'Atlantide*'s faults, you won't be able to take your eyes off that sand.

Why, you're right—they are on backwards.

THE HANDS OF ORLAC

(The Hands of Orlac)

MAY 12, 2009

Back when the concept of organ transplants qualified as science fiction, novelist Maurice Renard wrote a thriller called *Les Mains d'Orlac*. Call it a bastard offspring of *Frankenstein*; its plot revolved around the old theme of Science Giving Us Stuff We Shouldn't Have, in this particular case restoring severed body parts. Like a vigorous bastard, it has gone on to sire a whole subgenre of sci-fi/horror films, from its American remake *Mad Love* in 1935 through *The Thing with Two Heads* in 1972 to innumerable modern B-films. Hands, heads, eyeballs...you get home from the hospital and get the bandages off and things seem to be going *so* well, until your new body part turns out to be possessed by unspeakable evil. Or opens a vortex into a dimension of demons. It's always some damn thing, isn't it?

Les Mains d'Orlac was filmed in 1924 as *Orlacs Hände*, directed by Robert Weine, who had also directed *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* four

years earlier. Conrad Veidt, now minus the Tim Burton hairdo he wore as Cesare the Somnambulist in *Caligari*, played Paul Orlac. Paul, a neurasthenic with immense crystalline eyes, is married to Yvonne, a fellow neurasthenic with immense crystalline eyes. They have an idyllic marriage in a house filled with flowers, and a sex life apparently revolving around a lot of foreplay involving the hands. *Uh-Oh.*

But Paul, being a concert pianist *(Uh-Oh!)*, has to go on tours to earn the money to maintain their love nest, while the little wife pines away at home dreaming of the next time Hubby will return to run his adorable hands *(Uh-Oh!!)* over her swooning body. She goes to welcome him home at the train station, only to learn that there has been a terrible train wreck. A grim and well-directed sequence follows, as Yvonne and her chauffeur join the frantic relatives searching through the wreckage for survivors. Paul is located at last, a bloody mess, and stretchered off to some sort of private hospital where an eminent surgeon is eagerly awaiting the delivery of the body of a freshly guillotined notorious murderer for study. Just then Paul is brought into the emergency room and the doctor, after having a look at him, informs Yvonne that Paul should recover from the skull fracture, but unfortunately his hands...

"His hands!" screams Yvonne. "He's a pianist! You've *got to save his hands!*"

UH-OH.

I shan't tell any more for fear of spoilers, because of course you'd never guess what happens next on your own, would you? Of course not. But there is some rather neat crime-novel story machination and psychological suspense before the plot resolution. Veidt is brilliant as Paul, especially in his growing horror at his situation, managing to give his hands alien personalities of their own, stiff and bizarrely protruding from his shirt cuffs. To evoke Tim Burton's work again for a moment, this is the sort of role in which Johnny Depp would excel today.

Technically this is an Expressionist film, although the story's locations include only one dark medieval set with oppressive geometry. It differs from *Caligari* in the pacing, too. *Caligari* shuttles between dreamlike slowness and a rattling fast pace and is the more effective film for that. All reaction times in *Orlac* are slowed, drawn out to the

point of audience irritation. The film is 110 minutes long, largely due to an overdependence on slow takes and long, long, looooooong horrified disbelieving stares. The Friedrich-Wilhelm-Murnau-Stiftung has worked diligently to restore the film to something close to its original length, but in this one case some judicious trimming would have done us all a favor.

Their print is in fairly bad shape, too, nothing like the clean digital restorations we have grown accustomed to seeing. It's puzzling that they let this one out of the vault in such a condition. Possibly we can expect a real restoration soon, maybe at *Orlac*'s 90th anniversary in 2014?

Don't wait until then, though. For all its flaws, *The Hands of Orlac* really is a seminal film, and if you're partial to that particular B-movie subgenre of Demon Body Parts, you really ought to see it. But use your *good* eyes. You know, the pair that don't inexplicably display the last moments of murder victims.

Strange...there's a human with a sword hiding behind that tree...

DIE NIBELUNGEN

(Siegfried and *Kriemhild's Revenge)*
MAY 18, 2009

In 1924, when J.R.R. Tolkien was a harried young father who had yet to write *The Lord of the Rings*, Fritz Lang essayed his treatment of the Elder Edda legends with *Die Nibelungen*. Tolkien's version of the same story, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, has just (as of May 5th) been published. Your correspondent has yet to read it but will be interested to see Tolkien's take on the Big Germanic Legend. For those of you watching Lang's and Thea Von Harbou's version, here's what you'll get: Doom, doom, DOOM. And plenty of it.

That's not all, of course. You get a dragon, and dwarves, and a magical bit of netting that confers invisibility, and a cursed treasure, and knights and castles. In its day this was as celebrated a film as the Peter Jackson *Lord of the Rings*, and for largely the same reasons. It was an intelligent and reasonably faithful adaptation of a famous epic, with great special effects and camerawork. Like Jackson's *LOTR*, there

was too much story for one film, and so *Die Nibelungen* is a five-hour duology of two films, *Siegfried* (or *Siegfried's Death*) and *Kriemhild's Revenge*. The titles should clue you in: don't expect a happy ending. Spoilers follow, but honestly, who hasn't at least seen *What's Opera, Doc?* Come on. Don't be a whiner. You already know the story isn't going to end well.

If you're a fan of the Wagnerian Ring cycle, you may have a little trouble getting your head around the plot differences here. Wagner rewrote the epic and mixed in bits of other stories to create his four-opera megatragedy. Lang and Von Harbou's version sticks closer to the original story, and is considerably shorter as a consequence. Brunhild is not a valkyrie demigoddess but an amazonian queen of Iceland. The Norse gods don't put in an appearance at all. And, surprise! Attila the Hun is a major player in the second half of the game.

The other elephant in the room is the fact that this was one of Hitler's favorite films. You may well be wary of being force-fed five hours of Nazi propaganda, and it's a fact that in 1933 the German Ufa (having just fired all its Jewish employees) rereleased the first film with a Wagnerian soundtrack.

Watching *Die Nibelungen* as it was originally shown, though, you realize this isn't actually propaganda. It's a poisoned chalice. Lang and Von Harbou had arguably begun to work at cross-purposes by this time, and the film carries a double message. Von Harbou's dedication "To the German People" and the flourishes of racism in the depiction of other ethnicities prefigure her later enthusiastic embrace of Naziism. Lang's subtext, however, is more objective, particularly in the grueling second half of the story. Romance and Wagnerian grandeur are stripped away; no more dragons, no more magic, simply the inevitable consequences of a life philosophy that really, really sucks. We're talking Toxic.

Siegfried opens with all the trappings of a classic fairy tale. Here are little gnarled dwarves working at their forge in the roots under a tree, for all the world like a Brian Froud drawing. Here is the young hero Siegfried, working at forging the sharpest sword ever made, and the usual cognitive disconnect is in place: how come a strapping human-sized person is able to fit in the clearly lilliputian-sized smithy? It's never explained and doesn't matter. Siegfried overhears the dwarves

discussing Kriemhild, the virgin sister of the King of the Burgundians. He demands details, and declares that he's off to win her hand. He rides off on his white horse. The dwarves are clearly relieved to see him go, because he's a bit rude really.

And here, basking by a forest pool, is the Dragon, and for 1924 this was a magnificent bit of special-effects wizardry. It was 60 feet long, operated by 17 techs, and moved like an honest-to-gosh living thing. The extras on the Kino release include a comparative sequence of dragonslaying from *The Thief of Baghdad*, released the same year, and it's vastly inferior: a flopping hand puppet confronting Douglas Fairbanks's rear-projected figure. Siegfried happens on the Dragon and does battle, of course. It's a helluva sequence, with the Dragon breathing real fire and, when killed, bleeding out in arterial gushes. Tasting its blood, Siegfried gains the power of understanding the speech of birds, and a little bird tells him that bathing in the Dragon's blood will make him invulnerable. He promptly strips down and bathes, but the Achilles thing happens when a linden-leaf sticks to his back.

Gleefully unaware, Siegfried rides off to his next adventure. In a sequence evocative of Max Reinhardt's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, we see Alberich the Dwarf-King lurking in a tree trunk. He pulls a bit of magic netting over his head, goes invisible, and springs out on Siegfried as he rides by. Siegfried defeats him and Alberich pleads for his life, offering to make Siegfried rich. He leads him to a huge bowl filled with golden treasure and supported by chained dwarves. While Siegfried is gazing raptly on the loot, Alberich attacks him, but Siegfried is too fast for him, and as he dies Alberich curses the treasure. It's all downhill from here.

Siegfried, now armed with the magic sword, the magic netting, and the cursed treasure, and having changed his caveman furs for medieval knight attire, appears at the court of Gunther the Nibelung, King of the Burgundians. This is a chilly place where people stand around looking like chess pieces and there isn't a lot of furniture. All the men have blond pageboy bobs except for Hagen, the king's right-hand man. Hagen is a thorough badass. Hagen has a black beard and an eye patch, and wears his chain mail and raven-winged helmet everywhere, including the dinner table. Hagen never has a good word

to say about anybody. The king's minstrel sings of valiant Siegfried the Dragonslayer, and, although Kriemhild the king's sister thinks Siegfried sounds just dreeeamy, Hagen disses him. Nonetheless, King Gunther welcomes Siegfried and his Twelve Royal Vassals and his gold treasure to his court.

Siegfried demands Kriemhild's hand in marriage. Not so fast, says Hagen; first you have to help King Gunther in a personal matter. It transpires that Gunther is madly in love with Brunhild, Queen of Iceland, but Brunhild is a warrior queen who has demanded that any prospective suitor damn well better be able to defeat her in three challenges. Gunther is a spineless little cad and knows he can't win Brunhild, but maybe Siegfried can help him out? So off they go to Iceland. Forget visions of big-bosomed valkyries with blonde braids; Lang's Brunhild looks sort of like Margaret Dumont with a watering can stuck on her head. Nonetheless, Gunther's just gotta have her, so he and Siegfried between them use the magic netting to make it appear as though Gunther passes the three challenges. Downcast, Brunhild marries Gunther and Siegfried marries Kriemhild.

But wait! Gunther needs just one more little favor, before Siegfried can rush off to his own little blonde bride: Brunhild has to be, er, *sternly talked to* before she will submit to Gunther's marriage bed. Like, er, wrestled with? To break her steely, er, *spirit*? Rolling his eyes at all the Freudian metaphors, Siegfried goes off to wrestle Brunhild, using his magic net to make himself resemble Gunther. In the struggle Brunhild's serpent armlet comes off and somehow or other ends up in Siegfried's possession.

Times passes. Siegfried and Kriemhild are happy, happy, happy, although he has figured out about that linden-leaf-shaped patch on his back that aches when a low-pressure system rolls through Burgundy and, unwisely, he has entrusted Kriemhild with his secret. Gunther and Brunhild are unhappy, unhappy, unhappy, with Brunhild sitting around glowering at everyone and Gunther slinking like a whipped cur. Hagen is sarcastic and unhelpful. Kriemhild's mother finds the serpent armlet at the bottom of a sock drawer and says, "Gee, honey, why haven't you ever worn this to church?"

Kriemhild takes it to Siegfried, who is horrified to find this little

souvenir of Gunther's wedding night still kicking around. He explains about it and cautions Kriemhild never to tell anyone else. "OK," she says, innocently pushing it further up her arm where her veil hides it. But then she and Brunhild have a big catfight on the steps of the cathedral over who has the right to walk into church ahead of the other, and *of course* Kriemhild pulls out the armlet and waves it in Brunhild's face. And *of course* Brunhild, seething for revenge, tells Gunther that Siegfried actually raped her during that marital intervention or whatever it was, and she won't eat or drink until Siegfried is dead. And *of course* Gunther turns to Hagen to ask what to do, and Hagen goes off to wheedle the secret of Siegfried's vulnerable spot out of Kriemhild, on the pretext that if he knows where it is he can better protect her dear husband in time of war. And *of course* Kriemhild tells him. Hell, she even marks Siegfried's tunic with a helpful X to show where the spot is. And *of course* Hagen nails Siegfried in the back with a spear. Exit Siegfried.

"Ha, ha," screams Brunhild, "Joke's on you, Gunther! Siegfried was innocent!" So saying, she goes off and kills herself at Siegfried's funeral, because apparently she's been secretly in love with him all this time. Upstaged by her rival, poor Kriemhild rushes to demand justice, only to be confronted by the concept of German Loyalty, or *Nibelungentreue:* Hagen may have lied, Hagen may have treacherously killed Gunther's blood brother Siegfried, but because he's Gunther's sworn companion, *Gunther won't punish him.* Neither will Kriemhild's other two brothers. Hagen gets a free pass. Kriemhild is left to steam. In her position, I would have loaded the cursed treasure into a cart and ridden off with it right then, cheerfully tossing a torch into the castle thatching as I went. But oh, no: this epic is five hours long, remember?

Kriemhild's Revenge opens with Kriemhild brooding obsessively over Siegfried's tomb. Her constant cries for justice are ignored. Hagen goes into the castle treasury, steals the cursed treasure, and hides it in the Rhine, giving as his excuse that he's afraid it will be used to buy WMDs that will threaten Burgundy. He also steals Siegfried's sword. Kriemhild is outraged! But will Gunther do anything to punish the thief? Nope. *Nibelungentreue* is again invoked.

Kriemhild receives a marriage proposal from Attila the Hun.

Compared with her current life at Chez Nibelung, the plains of Hungary sound pretty good, and Kriemhild accepts on one condition: that her future husband agree to avenge any insult she suffers. So off she goes, refusing to kiss her brothers good-bye.

On arriving in Hungary, she realizes she might have made a mistake. Attila rules a kingdom of hovels that look like they've been sculpted out of pig shit. Attila's subjects are unwashed savages with wuzzy hair. Attila himself is no Nordic superman. In fact, he looks like a goblin. But he's desperately in love at first sight with Kriemhild. He spreads out his cloak in order that she needn't wade through the mud in his throne room. He treats her like the queen she is, conferring upon her a lot of Byzantine-looking crown jewels. He's kind to her even when he realizes she doesn't love him, and ecstatic when she bears him a little son. As he's galloping to her side to celebrate, we see Kriemhild in a profoundly sad moment: climbing from her bed in her grubby nightgown she goes to stand beside the baby's crib. She can't even bring herself to touch her child; he's just part of the price she's paid for the chance of revenge.

But Attila is overjoyed with his son, embracing and dandling the baby. He offers Kriemhild anything she asks for. She asks for her brothers to be invited to the baby's christening. Hmmm, he thinks, this might be awkward, but he agrees. The Nibelungs, accompanied of course by best buddy Hagen, saddle up and ride to Hungary, heavily armed. Not only do they not even stop at a Kmart to buy a gift packet of Onesies and a teething ring, they take an armed posse with them. Even to Attila, this seems uncouth, but he plays the gracious host and welcomes them in. Hagen is as nasty as ever to Kriemhild and, alone with Attila, she demands that he kill Hagen. "Are you nuts?" cries Attila. "He's my guest!" Furious, Kriemhild goes out and persuades her Hun subjects that it would be a good thing to avenge her insult. They all adore her, so they enthusiastically plot a mid-banquet attack on Gunther's knights.

Up in the throne room, the christening party is not going well. Attila, ever the loving father, has the baby brought in and shown off to his uncles. Hagen tactfully remarks that the boy looks sickly and probably won't live long. News comes of the skirmish going on in the

servant's hall and Hagen's response is to whip out his sword and *kill the baby.* Attila is crazed with grief, even Kriemhild has a spasm of maternal reaction, but how do her brothers react upon seeing their infant nephew murdered before their eyes? You guessed it: *Nibelungentreue.* Another free pass for good old Hagen.

The Nibelungs and their men hole up in the banquet hall, Kriemhild directs the Huns in besieging them there, and Attila, clutching the body of his child, retires to mourn him. Around a million Huns assail the hall, but the Nibelungs, being Aryan warriors, repel them with ease. Kriemhild says the Nibelungs can go free if they'll deliver up the man who murdered her husband AND her baby as well as stole her bride-gift, but how do they respond? *Nibelungentreue!*

At last the Huns set fire to the hall and the roof falls in. Everyone inside is killed but Gunther and Hagen, who, like a pair of cockroaches, seem to be able to survive almost anything. They are marched out and Kriemhild demands to know what Hagen did with her treasure. He won't talk. An overeager Hun beheads Gunther, and you can't help applauding by this time. Attila, gentleman that he is, hands Kriemhild Siegfried's sword and tells her to go crazy. Kriemhild beheads Hagen! Finally!! And then she dies too, killed by one of Attila's other guests in the original story, but in Lang's version she just seems to expire of inhuman emotion. Attila orders that she be carried back to Siegfried's tomb and buried beside him, because Siegfried was her true love.

Boy, what does it say of the values system in this story when *Attila the* freaking *Hun* is the voice of compassion and decency?

For all their blond pageboy haircuts and Teutonic Knight chain mail, it is impossible not to detest the Nibelungs, impossible not to cheer with the dirty, gleeful savages when they finally get their comeuppance. You have to wonder how far the *Nibelungentreue* concept drove a whole nation to act against every human impulse of morality in the name of idealized loyalty. You have to wonder whether Goebbels felt some satisfaction in comparing himself to the heroic Nibelungs, as he killed his children and set fire to his house. You have to wonder what bullshit bards Hitler imagined singing his story, as he crouched in his bunker at the end.

Zoidberg, you handsome devil! WHOOP-oop-oop-oop-oop!

HAXAN

(Haxan (Witchcraft Through the Ages))
MAY 25, 2009

In case you've been dying to know what was the most expensive Scandinavian silent film ever made, your pangs are at an end: it was 1922's *Haxan*. *Haxan*'s American title is *Witchcraft Through the Ages*, which is a distinct misnomer. A more accurate title would be *A Comparison of Medieval Witch Hunts with Modern Psychological Studies of the Hysteric Temperament*, but moviegoers would have stayed away in droves, I'm sure. They'd have missed a great show, though.

If you want something on the order of *The Exorcist* or *The Blair Witch Project*, this won't suit you. *Haxan* is a docudrama, a study of the human imagination as it attempts to explain the existence of illness, crop failures, cows that don't give milk, and pale young girls who steal things and/or fantasize about Entities bothering them. It was written and directed by Benjamin Christensen, who came across a copy of an ancient text on witch finding called the *Malleus Maleficarum* and was

inspired to film an examination of medieval superstitions. Christensen took three years to produce his film, and the effort he put into it shows. Not only are there meticulously recreated models based on old engravings, the historical sequences are lively and authentic. Christensen himself played the Devil and, in one bizarre cameo, Jesus, which makes you think he must have been an interesting person to know...

Haxan begins with a scholarly presentation on superstition and ancient models of the universe, complete with lecture-pointer in frame. After a charming little animated model of the medieval system is presented—Earth at the center, the crystal spheres with the planets, God and His angels massed like an Escher engraving outside it all—we get into the dramatized sequences about witchcraft.

While never veering from his argument that there were no real witches (as defined by the Church) and that all the fuss was due to superstition, Christiansen nevertheless has a lot of fun showing us the way people *imagined* witches operated. There are plenty of toothless crones in huts mixing disgusting brews in their cauldrons. The Devil prances around making faces and beckoning chaste wives into smooching him while their husbands sleep. There are several old woodcuts shown, one of which looks, I swear to you, like three witches having a solemn discussion over burgers and a Coke in a McDonald's.

We get to see a reenactment of a witches' Sabbat, complete with several jolly leering lesser devils and one big devil in a papier-mâché head who clearly can't see his worshippers very well. There is a spectacular (and horrible) animated model of Hell and its torments, with dozens of little animated devils stoking the fires. With all this, *Haxan* makes the point that morbid people imagined these things because their lives were dull, brutish, and short, and because medieval Christians tended to obsess on fearing Satan rather than following Christ. Some women accused as witches were in reality herbalists; some were nasty old biddies who did indeed peddle useless charms and curses; some were just old, ugly, and feeble-minded. Others were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The next sequence is the closest thing to a straight narrative drama. In a medieval village, a young man lies dying of some illness, wept over

by his wife and baby, his mother, and several elderly female servants. The wife declares that some witch must have put a spell on him. An ancient beggar-crone wanders into the kitchen and begs for food. The wife's charitable impulse to let the old thing have some soup quickly curdles as she realizes *this must be the witch!* Fortunately the Inquisition *(what a show)* is staying in town, so the young wife runs right off and tells a handsome young Inquisitor, who is clearly aroused by her clinging to his arm. An older Inquisitor quickly takes charge, however, and send his goons off to drag away the old crone.

The Inquisitors aren't merely there to punish; they want to *root out all witches!* They torture the old woman without results, until they demand the names of all the other witches in the village. The old woman promptly accuses all sorts of people who have been nasty to her, including the dying man's mother and servants. Away go the goons to drag these innocent ladies to torture, leaving the young wife and her baby alone. As Christensen points out, you can't beat the logic of the Inquisition. To be accused is to be guilty, and torture will prove it. If you disagree with the Inquisitors, you must be in league with the Devil yourself, so the goons come for *you* next. The village is decimated, most of its women burned at the stake, before the Inquisitors load up the torture gear into their wagons and move on to the next village. Christensen somberly adds that 8 million men, women, and children were burned as witches by the Inquisition.

The final sequences deal with the contrast between the ways mental illness was perceived in medieval times and how, in the enlightened early years of the 20th century, delusional people were diagnosed and treated instead. It leaves you with a wistful longing for those days when people assumed Science had swept the world clean of superstition and rank unreason, when people *knew* torture was useless barbarism and no devil was hiding under your bed...

Haxan has been particularly well served by the Criterion Collection DVD release. Not only is the print crystal-clear and splendidly restored, there are loads of extras, most notably the 1968 American edited version with commentary by William S. Burroughs (!) narrating and a special jazz score featuring Jean-Luc Ponty, among others. This was the version shown at college midnight matinees, and when bong-

enhanced made for surreal viewing indeed. Family entertainment it ain't, though, so wait until your kids have gone to bed before you slip *Haxan* into the DVD player.

Er.... Okay...it's a baby carriage about to hit a rock and plunge down a staircase?

SCHATTEN

(*Schatten*)

JUNE 1, 2009

Now, *this* is what I'd call German Expressionism.

Suppose someone gave a dinner party and the invitation specified that you could only come as your id. You know, your dark, primal knot of urges and longings, completely ungoverned by rational thought? The same force that wiped out the Krell in *Forbidden Planet*? The result might be something like the plot of 1923's *Schatten*, a.k.a. *Warning Shadows*. "Bizarre" doesn't even begin to describe it. Is it a masterpiece? In its way, yes. Is it awful? Yes, but *interestingly* awful. There are moments of pure genius. There are painfully dated moments. There are screamingly funny moments. Watching it is like getting very high and suddenly finding yourself in the midst of an Aubrey Beardsley drawing come to life. The subtitle is, in fact, *A Nocturnal Hallucination.*

It shares certain things with D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* in that it relies on symbolic names for its characters: "The Man" and "The

Woman" for example, implying that he stands for all men and she for all women. Like *Intolerance*, it gives us a lengthy peep into its creator's own unconscious, and we must recoil a little at the things we see there. Is this really how men see women? How Freudian! But we're getting ahead of our story...

Schatten appears to take place in the early years of the 18th century, but we're never sure, because there are a few anachronisms scattered about: samurai armor, some 20th-century furniture, Asian silhouette puppets. Maybe it implies that it's always the Age of Beethoven in the German Expressionist subconscious? But with martial suicidal baggage thrown in there with Schiller and Goethe? Whichever, we first see a stage upon whose curtain a grinning little Shadow-player is throwing shadow pictures. Here are our characters: the Man, the Woman, the Youth, the Three Gentlemen, the Maid, the Two Serving-men, the Shadow-player.

Now! Here's a dark market square overlooked by a grand house. The little Shadow-player, sort of a German Expressionist version of Mathieu Chedid crossed with Mr. Punch, wanders in and seats himself. He watches a pair of lovers embracing in silhouette on the shade of the big house. So does the sorrowful Youth who approaches. The Youth looks noble and poetic and about the way a young would-be lover would like to imagine himself. We see the lovers inside their big weirdly decorated mansion. The Man is a huge snarling blunt-featured bestial knot of passions, lips writhing, eyes bulging, stormy as Beethoven. He is dressed like Kaspar Hauser. This is how the German Expressionists conceived of the male Id, all right.

The Woman is a beauty, of course, in a Theda Bara sort of way, in a languid-eyelids, heaving-bosom seductress sort of way, and for whatever reason she is dressed as an Ancient Greek hetaera (that's a high-class hooker, for those of you who are getting tired of Googling all these references). Her leather-bound hair sticks out in a sort of handle at the back, a perfect invitation for cavemen to grab hold of it when dragging her off to their lairs. She is sensuous, vain, jewelry-coveting, and faithless, at the first chance shoving the Man into an empty bedroom so she can welcome in the Youth to her dinner party. Here we are, ladies, as the German Expressionists saw us, when they

weren't seeing us as Virgin Mothers. Eeeeewwwwww.

Here are the Three Gentlemen, arriving at the house after the Youth. Most sources on this film describe them as "suitors for the Woman's hand," but one has one's doubts. They are foppishly dressed, and they titter. They are most often framed next to the fruit bowl on the dining table. They seem to have come to the house merely to watch the fireworks as the Woman trades off between the Man and the Youth, and at one point they engage in mean-spirited play, pretending to kiss and fondle the Woman's shadow behind her back. *Not* gentlemen, clearly.

Of the Servants, the Maid is a little expressionless thing, devoid of personality, wearing silk stockings with seams down the back. Manservant 1 is young, hot-blooded, and resentful. Manservant 2 is old, shuffling, and downcast. The crazy Shadow-player shoves his way into the house and manages to convince everyone that he can really liven up the dinner party with his amusing silhouettes.

And we're off into a night of desires barely repressed, desires completely unrepressed, obscure wish-fulfillment, twisted urges, lusts as fiery as the German Board of Censors would permit, outright madness, and Freudian symbolism. There are no intertitles anywhere in the film to guide you, and you'll really wish you could lip-read German before finally going ahead and making up your own dialogue. My favorite moment is when the Man appears to be screaming, *"Go ahead! Stick your puny little rapiers into my wife! But cower before my MUCH BIGGER CUTLASS!"*

No, maybe my favorite moment is at the end, when the dejected Youth, all his dreams of romance cast down, wanders out across the marketplace in a cloud of Young Werther–esque melancholy and some peasant tries to sell him a cabbage. *So* anticlimactic, you know?

A few notes on the cast: almost the only actor you're likely to recognize, unless you watch a helluva lot of silent cinema, is the superbly weird-looking Fritz Rasp, in the role of the younger manservant. Rasp was one of Fritz Lang's regular players and invariably turned in a fine performance. If you have a very good eye for faces you'll realize that Alexander Granach, the Shadow-player, also did a star turn as the Renfield equivalent character in *Nosferatu*. IMDb insists that Rudolf

Klein-Rogge is in this film playing one of the three, er, *gentlemen*, but he manifestly isn't. The mincing men are Eugen Rex, Max Gülstorff, and Ferdinand von Alten.

The only available DVD is a restoration done by Kino, although it's only a restoration in the sense of combining several existing prints to get something as close to the original film as possible. No digital restoration at all, which is a real shame given Fritz Arno Wagner's magnificent photography. No extras. No commentary. What were they thinking? I propose you liven up your second or third viewing with a game: take a drink every time a thinly concealed phallic or yonic symbol appears onscreen. Double points if you can explain the defenestration scene in Jungian terms.

CGI? What's that?

PRINCE ACHMED

(*The Adventures of Prince Achmed*)

JUNE 8, 2009

The purpose of this blog has been twofold: I get to exercise my writing muscles on classic films everyone has seen. More rarely, I get the joy of turning my audience on to really good stuff of which they may not have heard. This week it's the latter, kids, seriously tasty treats spilled from a glittering cinema cornucopia.

I refer of course to *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, completed in 1926 and the earliest surviving full-length animated film, but in a larger sense to the entire body of work of its creator, Lotte Reiniger. Look at the illustration above. See those bathing nymphs? All that ferny subtropical vegetation? The cascading hair of the central figure? The delicately rendered water reflections? Every single one of them were cut out with scissors by one woman and photographed by her, on an intricate shadow-camera system she invented.

Lotte Reiniger (1899–1981) was a genius, a cultural treasure, a magnificent artist who lived hand to mouth most of her life, as she and

her husband dodged fascists and searched for project backers. Exposed at an early age to the fantastic films of Georges Méliès, at the age of 16 she developed a crush on actor Paul Wegener *(Der Golem)* and got her parents to enroll her in Max Reinhardt's theater company, to which Wegener belonged. This sort of story rarely turns out well, but in Reiniger's case everything went right. The young lady began making silhouette portraits of her fellow actors, of such high quality Wegener was impressed and commissioned her silhouette titles for his next film, an adaptation of the Pied Piper story.

So well were her contributions to the film received that she was admitted to an experimental animation studio, where she met her life partner Carl Koch, a writer and director. They found a patron in Louis Hagen, a wealthy banker who commissioned a film from them. The result is *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*.

It's a joy to watch, from start to finish, especially when you bear in mind that every single thing you see was created by Reiniger with a pair of scissors or, in some few cases, brushed sand or light projections. The results are breathtaking, primal storytelling with shadows and light. Reiniger's silhouettes even convey facial expressions. It's hard to imagine anyone would be capable of this quality of work now.

Prince Achmed's story is drawn from elements in *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*. An evil wizard lusts after the beautiful daughter of the Caliph. To win her hand he creates a mechanical flying horse, and rides it to the Caliph's palace. The princess's brother insists on having a ride on the horse and it bears him aloft, into a host of adventures that include dalliance with handmaidens, battle with demons, a quest to rescue a peri queen, an encounter with Aladdin, a shapeshifter duel...and an ugly old witch who is a *heroine*, for a change.

Make your inner four-year-old comfortable when you sit down to watch this one, and enjoy going along for the ride. As I watched, all sorts of memories began to surface, and I realized that I *had* seen this, as well as many of Reiniger's later works, when I was four: she animated a number of classic fairy tales for American TV in the 1950s. They enchanted me then, with their beauty and complexity, and I was delighted to discover that they have apparently survived and are available on DVD.

Is it suitable for watching with your real, external child? It is, unless you mind a faintly racy sequence in the peri queen's palace. Or you're hypersensitive to 1920s-style depictions of the inhabitants of Turkey or China, which in Reiniger's case are no more stereotyped than Disney's *Aladdin* or *Mulan*. I just dealt with it. It's a fairy tale, for crying out loud. If your offspring have reached the age where first-person-shooters and *Dragonball Z* are prime entertainment, you probably won't be able to convince them they'll enjoy *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*. If you have a little incipient geek, though, the sheer How-did-she-*do*-that? quotient is enough to make your kid pick up scissors and paper and essay a silhouette or two of his/her own.

The DVD from Image Entertainment (or the BFI, if you're in Europe) offers a nicely restored print, which is all the more remarkable in that the original negative and nitrate print have been lost; what you see on the screen has been pieced together from fragmentary copies. Included is a documentary on Reiniger and a charming little surprise: the most original commercial for Nivea Lotion you are ever likely to see.

Oh, I'm—Putting on my top hat—Tying up my white tie...

NOSFERATU

(*Nosferatu)*

JUNE 15, 2009

Somewhere high in the Carpathian mountains, just as the evening shadows are lengthening, a stagecoach pulls up at a rustic inn and disgorges a carefree young man dressed in the classic Biedermeier style. His trunk is hastily pitched after him and the stagecoach rattles away in a cloud of dust. Wolves howl in the distance. Wondering why the coachman could possibly be in such a gosh-darned hurry, the youth shoulders his trunk and enters the inn. Happy smiling peasants in traditional Transylvanian costume welcome the handsome young stranger! His trunk is squared away in his room and the Transylvanian bellboy doesn't even ask for a tip! The jolly innkeeper drinks the stranger's health in slivovitz and asks the stranger what he'll have to eat!

"I hear you serve an excellent goulash with red peppers," says the smiling boy. "Oh, and I arranged to have my mail sent on to this

address. Can you tell me if it's here yet? The next up in my Netflix queue is *Nosferatu*, and I was really looking forward to viewing it this evening."

A stark silence falls on the room. The peasants grow pale. His mustache drooping, the innkeeper turns to the young man and says, in a hoarse whisper, "*Nosferatu*?"

"From *Netflix*?" adds a trembling peasant.

Blinking away compassionate tears, an ancient crone rises and approaches the youth. Lifting an icon on a cord over her gaily patterned babushka scarf, she slips the religious image over the youth's neck.

"Wear this, for your mother's sake. It is the blessed icon of the Saints Bela and Boris. It will protect you against inferior public-domain prints of classic horror films on DVDs."

To be honest, though, we're lucky to have *any* print of *Nosferatu* available. When Albin Grau and Enrico Dieckmann of Prana Films decided to adapt Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* for their first production, they neglected to secure the rights from Stoker's widow. Figuring that they'd be safe from prosecution if they simply changed all the names of the characters, Prana Films went blithely ahead with principal photography in 1921. The resulting film was a justly praised masterpiece, but Mrs. Stoker sued them and won. The courts ordered all copies of the film destroyed. Fortunately enough copies had been hidden away in boxes full of Transylvanian earth to ensure *Nosferatu*'s survival, but Prana Films went bankrupt. Incidentally, this is one of film history's neater little ironies: "Prana" is Sanskrit for the breath of life, life energies, the vital force, and *Nosferatu* (being its first and last release) effectively drained the life out of Prana Films.

Work of genius though it is, a lot of your enjoyment of *Nosferatu* is going to depend on which version you see. I first watched a grossly truncated 16mm version in a storefront theater on Catalina Island in the 1970s and came away with the impression that, although undeniably creepy, *Nosferatu* was an incoherent mess. It wasn't until I caught a screening of Kino International's excellent restoration that I saw the film as its creators intended and was awed and appropriately horrified. *Nosferatu* isn't the first horror film, it isn't a particularly faithful adaptation of *Dracula* even if you change the names back, and

it is undeniably silent—a thing that apparently weirds out some of our younger readers (There, there, kids, just take your Xboxes and go sit someplace quiet while the grownups talk, OK?). But it is one of the finest horror films ever made and arguably the most frightening vampire film ever made.

Credit goes, in part, to Fritz Arno Wagner's cinematography and Albin Grau's production design, as well as the varied locations chosen for the different scenes. *Nosferatu* genuinely gives you the sensation of watching a dead world temporarily revived, something of the same shivery feeling you get when listening to the recently discovered clip of the earliest-recorded human voice (which you can do at firstsounds.org).

Credit must also go to Henrik Galeen's screenplay, which discards Stoker's basic premise of an ancient predator defeated by the modern world and deliberately places the action further back in time. Instead of the dictating machines, typewriters, and railway schedules of *Dracula*, the vampire here is defeated by a sort of mystical arrangement wherein a virtuous woman must sacrifice herself in order to destroy him. Instead of creating more vampires and building himself a sexy vampiric family of initiates, *Nosferatu*'s Count Orlok simply kills, and brings the plague in his wake with his hordes of attendant rats. All very medieval...

But the ultimate credit must go to brilliant principal actor Max Schreck. His Count Orlok truly looks like a dead man walking, humanity long rotted away to leave nothing but a giant rat in a long black coat, a mushroom-domed monster with staring eyes that hold no recognizable human expression. The young Bela Lugosi as Dracula was a handsome seducer, the young Christopher Lee much more earthily so; but no gothgirl or *Twilight* fan would ever want to go anywhere near Max Schreck's Count Orlok. The stink of the crypt radiates off him in waves and leaves one feeling cold and sick.

Not that the other actors don't earn their garlic and crucifixes. Alexander Granach as Knock (the Renfield equivalent in the plot) especially deserves a Freak of Nature Award for Most Believable Lunatic. Gustav von Wangenheim as Thomas Hutter (the Jonathan Harker figure) shuttles adequately between cheerful dimwit and

haunted victim. Greta Schröder as Ellen Hutter (or Mina) is perhaps not the greatest actress on film but, with her huuuuuge dark eyes and sickly pallor, no one can doubt for a second that this chick is enough of a morbid obsessive to decide to sacrifice herself to a horrible fate out of love for her husband.

As I have already intimated, you want to be careful which version of this film you see. Avoid at all costs cheapo public-domain prints with missing scenes, crappo misspelled title cards, and totally inappropriate soundtracks. Your best bets are either the Kino International 2-disc version, which has a fine print and tons of extras, or the Image version with commentary by film historian Lokke Heiss. I'd go with Kino, personally.

Back in the pre-IMDb days there was an urban legend that "Max Schreck" was an alias, the way Karloff's first billing as Frankenstein's monster was simply a question mark, because in German the word *schreck* means fear or terror. We now know that Schreck was a real actor, if a rather eccentric one, but E. Elias Merhige riffed on the legend in his superb film *Shadow of the Vampire*, which suggests that *Nosferatu*'s director F. W. Murnau somehow found a real vampire for the role and paid the consequences. Want the best Halloween film party ever? Play *Nosferatu* back to back with *Shadow of the Vampire*. You'll thank me—though not when you're lying awake at 3:00 a.m., unable to get Count Orlok's shadow off your bedroom wall...

Oh, great, you melted her BEFORE she could tell you where the cell keys are?

OZ ROAD TRIP, DAY 1

(*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*)

JUNE 22, 2009

It was shown on television once a year, with all the pomp and solemnity of a religious ritual. Some celebrity or other always gave it a lavish introduction. We turned out the lights and sat, breathless with anticipation, around the little TV set. Although we never owned a color TV, that was OK; my mom had seen it in the theater when it first came out in 1939, and she would explain about the shift to color when Dorothy first opened the door and looked out on Oz. We couldn't see the colors, but we *believed.* And then the lion roared and the crashing opening chords played, with those terrifying swooping voices, and nobody moved a muscle for two hours...

So vast is the shadow cast by the MGM production of *The Wizard of Oz*, so indelible are its characterizations, so perfect its music and so assured its cinematic immortality, that most people think of it as "The Original." In fact, it isn't. This most American of fairy tales was filmed

by its creator, L. Frank Baum, within a decade after the original Oz book was published, and Oz-related films were produced several times during the silent era. This column marks the first in a five-part journey through Ancient Oz.

Lyman Frank Baum was a showman at heart, although, like his Wizard, not really very good at the job. Having been fascinated with the theater as a young man, he was likewise enthusiastic about the possibilities offered by the nascent movie industry. In 1908 he produced a traveling multimedia extravaganza, *The Fairylogue and Radio-Plays*.

The show combined live action on stage with magic lantern slides and painstaking hand-tinted film (but no radio broadcasts; the term "Radio" was used then in the way "Space Age" was used in mid-20th-century advertising, referring to anything new and high tech). Baum himself appeared on stage as though he were giving a travel lecture and would appear to step into the film at intervals and interact with the characters. The film's plot combined elements of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and several other of Baum's books. A little girl named Romola Remus (poor child) was the silver screen's first Dorothy, and Nathaniel Mann composed music to go with the images, producing the earliest documented original film score.

It must have thrilled and astonished audiences, but the show was doomed, due simply to the fact that it cost more to put on than it could possibly make back at the box office. *The Fairylogue* road show closed after two and a half months. Baum wound up bankrupt and under contractual obligation to the film segment's producers, Selig Polyscope. It took several years and desperate measures (including selling off his royalty rights to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*!) for Baum to dig himself out of the financial hole he was in. The single print of the *Fairylogue* film must have stunk pretty badly of failure, for the Baum family took no particular care to preserve it and it crumbled away to dust. Only stills remain. Unless, of course, some time-traveling organization had an operative on hand to make a duplicate and stash it away for someone in the future to rediscover. We can hope, anyway...

Ave atque vale, *Fairylogue*. Selig Polyscope, well aware that the 1902 stage musical of *The Wizard of Oz* had been a smash hit, opted to produce its own film, *The Wizard of Oz*, in 1910, and this is the earliest

surviving Oz adaptation. It runs a mere 13 minutes, and survives in at least two prints, one of them in vastly better condition than the other. Both can be viewed on YouTube; don't bother with the Public Domain Theater version. The clip shown in two parts is the good one. If you'd like to own it, you'll need to buy the 3-disc *More Treasures from the American Film Archives* for the superior print, although the 3-disc collector's edition of the 1939 film includes the inferior print as an extra.

How does the 1910 version hold up, viewed today? Erm...well...if you love, and I mean really *love*, pantomime animals, you will love this film. There are at least five of them in frame at one point, and never less than two. There's Imogene the Cow (a holdover from the 1902 show, where she replaced Toto), Hank the decidedly randy Mule, Eureka the giant Kitten, the Cowardly Lion of course, and Toto himself—transformed from a miserable little mop dog into a Panto Dog by Glinda, so that Dorothy will have a more effective protector.

People who like to fume about the manner in which Disney changed beloved classics are often ignorant of history, not to mention the realities of show business. Baum himself cheerfully changed his plots around for the Oz musicals to suit current popular taste, and was never reluctant to cash in on Ozmania when he could (he had Dorothy and Tip hawking copies of his latest Oz book in the lobby during the intermissions at the *Fairylogue*). Selig Polyscope's film likewise leaves the book's story far behind, renaming the Wicked Witch of the West "Momba" and throwing in a lot of vaudeville business. If you want to see what stage comedians did to get laffs a century ago, watch the 1910 *Wizard of Oz*. I hope you have a high tolerance for pratfalls. And did I mention there's a scene involving a Union Enforcer? There's a little dance number in which the Wizard's departure is delayed by the girls in the Oz workforce going on strike.

Which is not to say this little film is without a certain charm. A lot of the plot and production design were borrowed directly from the 1902 musical and so provide us with our only chance to get an inkling of what watching that lost show must have been like. Low production values sometimes produce delights: a tiny child in a Flying Monkey (or is it a Flying Lizard?) costume and flying harness makes

several desperate swoops across the stage before finally managing to grab Momba's window frame and announce the arrival of Dorothy and friends. Some shots prefigure scenes in the 1939 film: Dorothy freeing the Scarecrow, the discovery of the rusted Tin Man, the Wicked Witch's death, the Wizard waving goodbye from the gondola of his balloon. And compare it with Edison's 1910 *Frankenstein*, and the Selig Polyscope *Wizard of Oz* looks like a Radio spectacular of cinematic expertise.

It must have been something of a success in its day, too, because Selig Polyscope went on to produce two more Oz films that same year, *Dorothy and the Scarecrow in Oz* and *The Land of Oz*. Neither, alas, has survived. Still, the cinematic journey down the yellow brick road had just begun. Baum resolved his affairs and moved to a sleepy little village just outside of Los Angeles. His remaining books were written "at Ozcot, in Hollywood," and, ever the optimist, Baum decided to try his hand at the new local industry. Next week we'll take a look at *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*, proudly presented by the Oz Film Manufacturing Company.

Who needs a pre-nup? It's destiny!

OZ ROAD TRIP, DAY 2

(*The Patchwork Girl of Oz*)

JUNE 29, 2009

It was a sleepy little temperance colony, quaint cottages and gardens nestled between orange groves and steep hills just west of Los Angeles. A generation before it had been sagebrush and coyotes, a generation later it was a burgeoning movie town; but for that brief idyllic time in 1910, Hollywood looked like the perfect place for a successful writer to settle down, build his dream house, and maybe do some gardening.

So L. Frank Baum settled in at "Ozcot," and one imagines his wife was grateful that they now lived out in the middle of nowhere, far from the temptations of show business that had bankrupted Baum in 1908. Unfortunately for her, D. W. Griffith and the Biograph company had just discovered Hollywood, too, shooting a film (*In Old California*) there that same year. Overnight, barns all over the village were being converted to movie studios. Baum heard the siren call of showbiz once more and in 1914 founded the Oz Film Manufacturing

Company. Rather than attempt another version of *The Wizard of Oz*, to which Baum had lost the rights anyway, he set to work on a screenplay adaptation of his novel *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*.

The result is the first full-length Oz film, and it is a decidedly mixed bag.

Baum wisely streamlined the storyline, leaving out several characters and subplots. Ojo, a Boy (at least, that's what the first title cards *say* he is) lives in poverty in Oz with his Unk Nunkie, a white-bearded ancient. The bread trees have stopped bearing, the cupboard is bare, and Ojo persuades Unk Nunkie that they have to go to the Emerald City, where they will presumably be eligible for Emerald WIC coupons. Off they go! But theirs is not the only drama playing out in Oz. Dr. Pipt, a Crooked Magician, has been busy in his magic shop for six years, stirring four pots with both hands and feet (no wonder he's crooked). He's trying to create the Powder of Life. Meanwhile his wife, Margolotte, is annoyed that she has to do all the housework by herself and decides to create a servant girl from an old patchwork quilt and assorted scraps. Outside, Dr. Pipt's daughter Jesseva is having a romantic stroll in the garden with her Munchkin boyfriend Danx. (Who is neither a dwarf nor a midget, by the way; Baum never indicated the Munchkins were Little People.) The young lovers join a throng of other Munchkins, and all dance joyfully.

Just when it looks as though an actual plot is developing, though, in come the Pantomime Animals.

The first of them, anyway, and the least appealing: we first meet Mewel, a panto mule, in an extended sequence in which he rubs his butt against a tree. At least, we can hope that's what he's doing. He encounters Ojo and Unk Nunkie and won't let them cross a bridge. They finally shoo him away and go on to Dr. Pipt's house, where they are welcomed as guests. Dr. Pipt has just finished his labor of six years and prepares to use the tiny pinch of Powder of Life that has resulted on the patchwork servant. But Ojo, naughty boy, mixes up a vial of brains on the sly from a cabinet containing big bottles of Cleverness and other characteristics. He fills the Patchwork Girl's head up with ideas, but unfortunately fails to add any sense of balance or locomotor skills. The first thing she does on springing to life is knock over a

Liquid of Petrifaction. It spills on Margolotte, Unk Nunkie, and Danx, turning them into statues.

Dr. Pipt isn't about to spend another six years stirring four kettles at once—his thigh muscles already look like Popeye's arms—but luckily he has the recipe for a reanimating potion, and the rest of the film involves the quest for the potion's ingredients. Along the way our heroes encounter the Woozy (another panto animal, but much less annoying and actually a necessary part of the plot), the Lonesome Zoop (who looks like a cross between a Flying Monkey and the Grinch and is completely extraneous to the plot), and the Tottenhots, who are... unfortunate racial caricatures.

However, among the costumed extras capering about in the Tottenhot scene are a couple of Hollywood newcomers who clearly need the box lunch and bus fare they're earning, but won't for long: Hal Roach and Harold Lloyd. They struck up a friendship on the set of *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* and went on to become Hollywood legends themselves. Good luck spotting Roach, but Lloyd gets a second moment in front of the cameras as one of the jurors in Ozma's courtroom. Look for him at the far right, in blackface. At the far left is the Scarecrow, who gets bored with jury duty and wanders outside, where he encounters the Patchwork Girl of his dreams. Cue the violins and floaty hearts.

The Patchwork Girl of Oz ought to have been a rousing success. It wasn't. It was such a dismal failure that Paramount, who was the Oz Film Company's distributor, declined to accept its remaining two Oz films, which had already been made. A few abortive attempts were made to reorganize, but the company folded, and although Baum's finances had been cannily arranged to avoid investing any of his own money this time, the disappointment is thought to have shortened his life.

What has *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* got in its favor? Quite a lot, from our point of view in 2009. If you want to see how Oz's creator envisioned his own work, here it is. The costumes have the real feel of the O'Neill illustrations, with the men in vaguely Elizabethan dress and the women ruffled up like outsize dolls. Lots of pointy hats. Most of the exteriors were filmed at the Panama-California Exposition in

San Diego, which provided exotic-looking backgrounds, although in one shot somebody's genuine old adobe house is used. There are some charming stop-motion magic scenes and camera tricks. The plot is the most coherent of Baum's surviving films, by virtue of being the most intact. And there's all that historical significance: the pairing of Hal Roach and Harold Lloyd! The fact that Dick Rosson, who played Danx, was the brother of cinematographer Hal Rosson, who worked on the 1939 *Wizard of Oz*.

On the other hand...nobody in cast or crew seemed to have realized that acting for the cameras was not at all the same thing as acting on stage, a common enough failing in the early days of cinema. What's worse, though, is that not only do they seem to be playing to a stage audience, they seem to be playing to a stage audience in Hayfield, Iowa in 1879. Clearly the operating theory here is that cavorting wildly, falling down, and LOTS AND LOTS OF PANTO ANIMALS will prove just irresistibly hilarious. And will appeal to the kiddies besides. I have been babysitting small children on and off for a half-century now, and it's been my personal experience that one sure way to terrify kids into screaming hysterics is to put them into a situation where something in a big creature costume is pursuing them. You've been there, I'm sure. "Come back, sweetheart! It's just Goofy! Don't you want to have your picture taken with Goofy?" *Hell no,* Auntie! And there are really an unreasonable number of menacing creatures in animal costume in the silent Oz films. The post-matinee night terrors must have been awesome.

Baum had a curious blind spot that way, and sometimes it worked as a strength... *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is powerful because it frightens as well as enchants. But consider the fact that the original draft of *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* contained a sequence about a village of animated vegetables who raise "Meat People" for food, complete with an illustration of a veg-farmer watering a row of children's heads... Baum's illustrator tactfully suggested the episode be dropped. And what were preliterate kids to make of the cover of Baum's *John Dough and the Cherub*, which showed the eponymous hero smiling as a large knife sliced through him? Jeez.

To conclude: your only option for viewing this film at the present

time is in a fairly cheapjack collection that has appeared under several labels since 1996, and its sole virtue is that it does give you all of Baum's films that were available at that time (quite unrestored) plus Larry Semon's 1925 adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*. It also gives you a repetitive, inappropriate musical score and annoying voice-overs. Don't waste your money! Something better is coming soon...about which, more next week when we look at *The Magic Cloak of Oz*.

So...um...call me?

OZ ROAD TRIP, DAY 3

(*The Magic Cloak of Oz*)
JULY 6, 2009

The Magic Cloak of Oz is not, in fact, set in Oz at all. It's an adaptation of Baum's own favorite among his books, *Queen Zixi of Ix.* The Oz books being the commercial success that they were, however, someone in the Oz Film Manufacturing Company must have decided that repackaging *Ix* as Oz was a smart move. It didn't help, unfortunately.

Filmed in 1914, using the same locations and many of the same cast members as *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*, *The Magic Cloak of Oz* was originally scheduled for release at the end of September 1914. So badly was *Patchwork Girl* received, however, that Paramount declined to distribute any other Oz films. *Magic Cloak* wasn't released until 1917, when a British film distributor picked it up. It may have been at this point that it was cut down from one five-reeler to two two-reel films, released in the UK as *The Magic Cloak* and *The Witch Queen*, respectively. All the original title cards are missing as well. Unfortunately these two

prints constitute all we have had of the original version, and although they were cobbled back together for the 1996 video release, obviously a lot of footage was missing.

What survived holds together pretty well, plot-wise. The Fairies of the forest of Burzee, dancing in the moonlight, decide to weave a magic cloak that will grant one wish to its owner and to any subsequent owner, assuming the new owner hasn't stolen it. Being transparent camera effects, however, the Fairies haven't an idea in their pretty little heads what to do with the cloak, so they ask the Man in the Moon. He (scarily played by someone made up as the Joker peering through a cutout Moon, in what might be a tip of the cinematic hat to Méliès) tells them to give the cloak to the unhappiest person they can find.

The scene shifts to Noland, introducing us to the Ferryman of the Vinegar River, who lives there with his two children Fluff (a girl) and Bud (a boy, played not very convincingly by Violet MacMillan). The best pal and playmate of the tots is—wait for it—Nickodemus, a panto mule! Fred Woodward, who played a panto mule in *every single Oz film* made by Baum's company, must have known where a few bodies were buried.

Underlining the fact that this isn't Oz, we get two quick deaths in succession: the King of Noland snuffs it without an heir and the Ferryman drowns. Fluff and Bud are taken in by their witchy Aunt Rivette, who decides to relocate with them to the capital city of Nole. They load all their earthly goods on the back of Nickodemus and set off. Nasty Aunt Rivette ain't wearing that putty nose and pointy hat for nothing; by the time they reach Nole, Fluff is weeping and declaring herself the Unhappiest Girl in the World. Enter Fairy with Magic Cloak.

Meanwhile, there is a fearsome band of robbers in the forest, who have captured a little girl (played by an actual child) named Mary. Meanwhile also, Queen Zixi of Ix has lived over six hundred years and still looks young and beautiful to everyone else, but she has one of those Dorian Gray things going and can't look in a mirror without seeing an ancient crone. Oh, if only she had a magic cloak that granted wishes! And of course she gets to hear of one, and in magical disguise sneaks over the border to Noland. Meanwhile, too, some freakish

globular creatures called Rolly Rogues are mustering an army to attack Noland in hopes of confiscating the Nolanders' soup. And did I even need to mention that Nickodemus the panto mule runs away to the forest and meets something like eight or nine other panto animals? Including a lion (though not the Cowardly one) played by Hal Roach. Anyone watching this intent on gaining clues to Roach's later talent as a director will discover that he knew how to mime washing his face like a cat, but that's about all.

You'll have to watch *The Magic Cloak of Oz* to see how all these disparate plot elements join up, and good luck to you if you watch any of the versions available as of this writing. What survives of the original film is in fairly good condition, save for a few bleached-out scenes, but the loss of an entire reel does affect the film's coherency. The 1917 title cards don't help either, many of them being too dark to read and several of them containing confusing errors.

If, by some chance, *Queen Zixi of Ix* was your favorite book as a child, you will probably concede that Baum did better by his original source here than he did with his Oz books. Very little information exists on the production, however. Noted French actor and acrobat Pierre Couderc is in the film somewhere, possibly in a panto costume, but which one? I'd guess that the Oz Film Manufacturing Company bought a rail car full of old costumes at a good price between making *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* and *Magic Cloak*, to judge from the abundance of panto beasts: an elephant, a bull, a tiger, a crow, a...kangaroo? A lamb? Possibly a chicken?

Other costumes are varied enough to invite a guessing game about their original use. Diaphanous gowns in abundance for the fairies, long wigs and peculiar striped waistcoats for the court of Noland (a production of *Iolanthe*?), what looks like a platoon of Roman soldiers passing through at one point (*Ben Hur*?), peasants in vaguely Dutch costume (*Hans Brinker*?), and a banquet at which a couple of Babylonians seem to have wandered in from a silent Biblical epic. Or maybe they're cavemen. The accepted convention of the day was that robbers all wore loudly patterned kerchiefs under feathered hats with the brims turned up (*Fra Diavolo*?), and the robbers in *Magic Cloak* wear theirs proudly.

Until recently we were unlikely to see a restoration of *The Magic Cloak of Oz*, unless the missing reel and the original title cards had survived in some private collector's vault somewhere. Well, surprise! Something of the sort must have happened, because Warner Home Video has announced an immense 4-disc 70th-anniversary release of the 1939 *Wizard of Oz* that will contain, among its extras, what is being heralded as the complete original version of *The Magic Cloak of Oz*, complete with missing footage. In fact, *all* the silent Oz films will be included in the Warner release.

I have postponed buying the 1939 *Wizard of Oz* for years, suspecting—correctly—that no sooner would one pricey deluxe version with extras come out than another, even *more* pricey version with even *more* extras would be released. With the 70th-anniversary edition, though, I'm finally going to lay out my hard-earned bucks, if for no other reason than the chance to get better versions of the silent films. You may opt otherwise; the price is steep, especially if you already own a copy of the 1939 film. Your call.

Next week: *His Majesty, the Scarecrow of Oz!*

Oil can what?

OZ ROAD TRIP, DAY 4

(*His Majesty, the Scarecrow of Oz*)
JULY 13, 2009

With *His Majesty, the Scarecrow of Oz* we come to the last of the films made by the Oz Film Manufacturing Company. If Baum had chosen to send this one up to bat first, rather than *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*, Paramount might have been more receptive to releasing the other two films. Even so, *Scarecrow* was the best received by critics of the day and did even better at the box office when it was briefly retitled *The New Wizard of Oz* and rereleased in 1915. Unfortunately its success was too little too late for Baum's film venture. To make matters worse, the first reel was thought lost for a number of years. Several generations missed out on a chance to see *His Majesty, the Scarecrow of Oz*, but we are luckier.

Anyone interested in the creative process and the way writers revise and recycle their work to suit expedience will find *Scarecrow* fascinating. Baum had, at this point, lost the rights to his original

Wizard of Oz story. With the screenplay for *Scarecrow*, he indulged in a sort of alternate universe retelling of the same tale, but with some new characters, new origins for his old characters, and perhaps a neat idea or two that had occurred to him too late to include in the original. Not only is *Scarecrow* the closest thing we'll ever have to Baum's original story as he might have filmed it, but he even mined the new ideas in the screenplay for his ninth Oz book, *The Scarecrow of Oz*.

Besides, there are neat special effects, dancing witches, and...a panto mule, of course.

The film opens with Oz Film's logo, which is Ozma's smiling face gazing out on the audience. Ozma notwithstanding, we quickly learn that somebody named King Krewl is now ruler of the Emerald City. King Krewl is a sight to behold, in Elizabethan doublet and trunk hose, *spats,* and a crown that looks as though it came out of a Christmas cracker. He may be eeevil and a bad dresser to boot, but Krewl's daughter Princess Gloria is a sweet young thing. She doesn't at all care to be married off to her father's old courtier Googly-Goo, however, and wanders off to the garden to lament her fate. There she meets the palace gardener's boy, Pon, and it's love at first sight.

In a somewhat uneconomical bit of storytelling, King Krewl catches the lovers embracing not once but twice, and Pon is banished. Princess Gloria refuses to marry Googly-Goo anyway. Here the narrative jumps around a bit...

We learn that "Dorothy, a little girl from Kansas," has somehow or other wound up in Oz. She is taken prisoner by the witch Mombi and dragged away to be a kitchen slavey at the witch's hut in the forest. Meanwhile, a couple of farmers are making a scarecrow. They set it up on its pole and ride away. No sooner are they gone than who should emerge from the depths of the cornfield than a bunch of chorus girls dressed as...er...sunflowers? And they are led by the Spirit of the Corn, who wears braids, a headband with a feather in it, a deerskin dress—the whole Hollywood Native American stereotype. She brings the Scarecrow to life and vanishes.

King Krewl drags Princess Gloria to Mombi's hut and leaves her there, asking the witch to freeze his daughter's heart so that she will no longer love Pon. Mombi is delighted to oblige and pitches Dorothy

out the door so she can't snoop. Snoop she does, however, as does Pon, who creeps up from another direction. In one of the funniest scenes in the film, Mombi summons up her coven, and they dance about before a cauldron. Gleeful mugging and capering follow, and blacked-out teeth galore. One of the witchettes is wearing a bat outfit adorable enough to make mothers everywhere want to copy it for their toddlers' next Halloween costume. Gloria's heart is taken out, frozen, and replaced, in an entirely untraumatic scene using a sort of valentine heart/modeling clay prop and rather badly matched stop motion. Dorothy and Pon, having noticed each other while eavesdropping on all this fun, team up to rescue Princess Gloria. They run away with her, witches in hot pursuit, but are unable to make much speed because the enchanted Princess tends to sort of wander slowly and disdainfully across the landscape, and does so for the rest of the film.

Enter the panto mule! Yes, he's back, unnamed this time but full of fight, and he obligingly takes on the witches while Dorothy and Pon hurry the Princess to safety. One witch actually takes flight on a broom, in an adroitly managed flying harness, and because this scene is shot outdoors in real Southern California oak savannah one assumes primitive boom equipment had to have been involved. You really hope some poor uncredited extra didn't end up dumped on her fanny in the chaparral.

Our heroines and hero run into the Scarecrow, who joins their party, and shortly thereafter find the Tin Woodman (played by French acrobat Pierre Couderc), who is apparently already the Emperor of the Winkies. Notwithstanding, the Winkies haven't noticed that their Emperor has rusted solid in front of his own tin palace, and here follows the iconic scene in which Dorothy and the Scarecrow free him by oiling his joints. Shortly thereafter some footage from *The Magic Cloak of Oz* is reused, in which the Lonesome Zoop battles a Lion. IMDb credits Fred Woodward as playing all the animals in *Scarecrow*, but given that all three films were made with pretty much the same cast and within days of one another, it's much more likely that the guy in the Lion costume is Hal Roach. Cut to a new scene in which the Lion bites the Scarecrow and spits out straw; bites the Tin Woodman and paws his teeth in pain; and eyes Dorothy suspiciously, deciding

he's better off not attacking her. He joins the party, needless to say. So there they all are, on their way across Oz, harassed by an evil witch every step of the way! Quite like old times. Only different.

They have several adventures before running into the Wizard, who is a traveling magician with a wagon drawn by—wait! Look! Can that be the Sawhorse? It is! And he looks just like John R. Neill's illustrations! Which means the costume must have been unbelievably uncomfortable for the luckless actor inside. The Wizard has *real* powers here, and quickly provides useful help in resolving the plotline.

His Majesty, the Scarecrow of Oz is a lot of fun, not least in its enthusiastic use of primitive camera tricks. Watch particularly for the Wall of Water scene, which uses simple optical illusions to mess with your perception. Baum's inventiveness is evident here, and everyone seems to be having a good time. The Scarecrow talks constantly; I wished, again, that I could read lips, because he's evidently improvising dialogue and I'd love to know what he was going on about. But the prize for Most Overacting in a Witch Costume goes to Mai Wells as Mombi, whose nonstop grimaces and fist shaking steal the film.

You can view *Scarecrow* online at the Internet Archive, or you can watch the lousy narrated print that's been in general circulation since 1996 from various public-domain DVD companies. The film has never been restored and should be; I'm hoping Warner Home Entertainment will clean it up for that pricey 70th-anniversary collection this autumn. If nothing else, maybe they'll get rid of that stupid soundtra—

But wait! What's that ghastly sound? That sort of flatulent, flapping noise? What's that on the horizon? Do I see a cyclone advance, bearing a...dead turkey? Run for cover, cinephiles everywhere! Next week I bring you the worst Oz film ever, Larry Semon's execrable 1925 silent *Wizard of Oz*.

Dorothy can't believe what she's watching. Neither will you.

OZ ROAD TRIP, DAY 5

(The Wizard of Oz)

JULY 21, 2009

Mike Myers or Roberto Benigni would understand, I guess. Take a beloved children's classic and make it a star vehicle for a popular comedian! If the role isn't really appropriate for the comedian, change the story, which doesn't matter anyway, because who cares what kids think? Put in plenty of leering gags to appeal to "adults," the way they did in *The Cat in the Hat*, or pretend there's nothing deeply disturbing in a fifty-year-old man playing a little wooden boy.

But long before kiddy lit was outraged by the moderns, it was violated without so much as a kiss or a box of chocolates by Larry Semon, in his 1925 adaption of *The Wizard of Oz*.

By 1925, L. Frank Baum was several years in his grave. His widow Maude made a priority of regaining the rights to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (though, oddly enough, she failed to realize that there was any value in his original manuscripts, which she burned in the backyard

incinerator!). Maude turned the rights over to her eldest son, Frank Joslyn Baum. Nothing much was done with them; another filmed version of the story was begun in 1921, directed by Ray C. Smallwood, but was never completed.

Enter Larry Semon.

Semon was a comedian who specialized in doing the sort of stuff Pee-Wee Herman parodied: the child-man, the little guy, the Pierrot clown who dances through life licking a lollipop, often brutalized by fat villains but always winning out in the end through his innocence. For a while he was nearly as highly paid as Chaplin, until audiences began to realize that each Larry Semon comedy had essentially the same slapstick plot as the last. Matters grew worse when Semon was given some creative control over his two-reelers at Vitagraph, running them far over budget. Vitagraph had enough, in the end, and suggested Semon might want to produce and underwrite his own films thereafter. Semon was a balloon drifting downward, working at Chadwick Pictures, when he decided to option *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

He laid his money out; he did more, enlisting Frank Joslyn Baum (billed as "L. Frank Baum Jr.") to write a script treatment. It was understood that Semon would play the Scarecrow, and that should have worked out all right, given Semon's shtick. Baum the younger may even have donated the original Cowardly Lion costume to Semon's production, out of the relicts of the Oz Film Manufacturing Company; the one seen in the film certainly looks like the same one Hal Roach wore. But then Semon himself and a writer named Leon Lee worked over the screenplay, and...ohhhh, dear.

It's not enough to say the result was a disaster. It's not enough to say *Wizard of Oz* bears no resemblance to the original book. The result was a bizarre, disjointed, *appalling* disaster that bears no resemblance to the original book and manages to score heavily in the "Things You Never Thought You'd See in an Oz Film" trials.

What sort of things, you may ask? How about a vomiting duck? A female impersonator (played by one Frederick Ko Vert—is that droll or what?) in a peacock headdress doing a mystic dance. A black character sitting in a watermelon patch, eating a watermelon. Spies from Oz, *dressed as gauchos*, arriving in Kansas *in a biplane* and threatening

Auntie Em with revolvers. The Emerald City represented by a Russian cathedral. Lines like "Wizzy, do your stuff!"

You have no idea any of this will be paraded before your horrified eyes when the film starts, as reverently as can be, with Semon as an Old Toymaker working in his shop, where dolls representing the Tin Man, Dorothy, and Scarecrow are on display (though not the Lion; one assumes he has a separate but equal shelf somewhere out of sight, on account of he's, er, African). In toddles the Toymaker's little granddaughter, who asks her grampy to read her *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Grampy has no clue about what it takes to please a child, judging by the story he proceeds to relate: How one day the "townsfolk" of Oz woke up to discover their baby Princess had vanished, which drove them nearly to riot, and somehow or other they remained in that condition for the next eighteen years without ever actually doing more than grumbling loudly and maybe shaking pitchforks under the castle's windows now and then. Oz, we learn, is ruled by the evil Prime Minister Kruel, assisted by Lady Vishuss and Ambassador Wikked. Subtle, no?

And there is also a handsome mustachioed Prince Kynd hanging around the palace. It is never explained why he isn't ruling in the lost Princess's stead rather than what he is doing, which is joining the populace of Oz every day at noon as they dress up like Dutch peasants, crowd into Kruel's throne room, and shake their fists. Kruel squirms and grimaces on his throne and calls for the Wizard to distract them with magic tricks. The Wizard, played by old Keystone warhorse Charles Murray, is described as a charlatan without any real magic. Nevertheless, he summons the Phantom of the Basket, who dances most scarily. At least, the populace are terrified; Prince Kynd laughs heartily and pronounces it all "A load of applesauce!"

Cut back to the tot being read to, who protests, "Grampy, I don't like this!" We are *so* with her. She wants to know when she's going to hear about the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Cowardly Lion. Not anytime soon, honey, because now the plot shifts to Kansas. We meet Dorothy, as portrayed by Semon's wife Dorothy Dwan, a boop-oop-be-doop maiden gathering roses. We meet Auntie Em and Uncle Henry. She's mild and sweet and motherly; he's a hugely fat and abusive psychopath.

Hired hands on their farm include Semon, who spends most of his time napping in the hay; Oliver Hardy, surprisingly young and trim and...gee, actually sort of handsome without his mustache; and a black actor named Spencer Bell, though billed in this film as—get this—G. Howe Black.

You can make the argument that art shouldn't be judged outside its historical context, you can grit your teeth and hope Bell collected a fat paycheck that paid his rent and bought groceries...it's still pretty hard to watch the scenes in which he is made the butt of almost every cheap racist joke that could be devised. Example: he's the only one of the three farmhands to have a name. It's Snowball. Are you having fun yet? No? Well, deal with it; matters aren't going to improve any.

Hardy's character is actively courting Dorothy; Semon's character loves her wistfully from afar. Uncle Henry unleashes a torrent of rage on Dorothy. Dorothy remarks to Auntie Em that he scarcely acts in an avuncular fashion, and Auntie Em explains that Dorothy is, in fact, adopted. Flashback to eighteen years earlier, when on a dark and stormy night someone left a basket on the doorstep of the farmhouse. Inside the basket were a baby girl and a letter containing another letter, which the basket's occupant must not open until her eighteenth birthday.

Meanwhile, in Petrograd...I mean Oz...the peasants are revolting again. Kruel can't deal with it and sends Ambassador Wikked on a mission to the farm in Kansas. Wikked is to recover the secret letter left with the baby, because "It can save us," and if he can't get the letter he must do away with Dorothy. Wikked and his thugs dress up in the aforementioned costumes—maybe they're not gauchos, maybe they're supposed to be Zorro, or the guy on the Sandeman Sherry bottle—and away they go in their biplane to Kansas, where they land and come sneaking up to the front gate just as Dorothy is having her 18th birthday party and about to read the secret letter.

Wikked demands the letter. Uncle Henry, having suddenly undergone a complete change of character, refuses and stoutly defends Dorothy. There is a lot of violent and sadistic behavior before a storm erupts and sweeps everyone off to Oz, except for Auntie Em, who is presumably killed, because we never see her again. The storm, by the

way, is one of the best moments in the film. Not only is it a bravura piece of special-effects work, it is a positive delight to watch the damn farm wiped off the face of the Earth. By the time you get that far in the film, if you do, you'll understand why.

Now the plot logic breaks down completely. It turns out the secret letter merely explained that Dorothy was the true Princess of Oz. *That* was going to save Kruel and his cronies? Dorothy is installed as Princess but does nothing to prevent her friends from Kansas from being thrown in the Dungeons of Oz. They run away and, briefly, to avoid capture, don their respective disguises as Scarecrow and Tin Man. Snowball is later presented with a lion costume to lend him protective coloring—or something—in the Dungeons, because they're filled with lions. And Gypsies. Or possibly pirates. Or maybe they're supposed to be banditti. There's a breathless rescue involving another biplane. And so on and so forth.

Profoundly offensive and incoherent, *Wizard of Oz* nearly bankrupted Chadwick Pictures, which was already one of the Poverty Row studios. Both the studio and Semon were history within a few more years, although Semon's story ends with an intriguing mystery: after filing for bankruptcy in 1928, he returned to vaudeville and suffered a nervous breakdown that same year. He vanished into a sanatorium in Victorville, a little town on the edge of the Mojave, and supposedly died there of pneumonia and tuberculosis. He was only 39. Dorothy Dwan insisted that something weird was going on; she was only allowed to see him once, in a dimly lit room and from a distance, and two days afterward was told he had died and had left strict instructions that his was to be a closed-casket funeral with immediate cremation afterward. Exit Larry Semon, dead or alive. His career was certainly dead.

And the years rolled by... L. Frank Baum's heirs quarreled. Maude sued and disinherited her eldest son, Frank Joslyn, and he was so ostracized by the family that almost no one would agree to be interviewed when he wrote his father's biography, *To Please a Child*, resulting in a lot of improvised history. Ozcot, the charming little home on the corner of Cherokee and Yucca, grew emptier and more rickety year by year, and one hopes it had no structural precognition of the future when it would be unceremoniously bulldozed and replaced

with a hideous apartment building. That prime piece of Hollywood Nothing architecture squats on the corner to this day, devoid of any commemorative plaque.

But....

I like to imagine that somewhere in the ruins of Baum's garden, the drifted pearly ashes of his manuscripts worked their way into the soil and diffused magic. The magic added a pleasant weirdness to an already strange little town, but it also went seeking, like silver lightning underground. Somehow or other, after years, it came to the surface again in Culver City, and, despite all the concentrated crassness of the movie industry it jumped the gap to spark the 1939 version of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Which, is, of course, a talkie; so our road trip ends here.

Oh, cripes, everyone's in formal dress! You told me this was a costume party!

NOT QUITE FORBIDDEN PLANET

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*)

JULY 27, 2009

Ahhh, Shakespeare. Name me any other 16th-century writer who has managed to influence modern fantasy *and* science fiction. Take his fairy extravaganza, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: urban fantasy riffs endlessly on the machinations of various fairy courts, and most owe a debt to Shakespeare in the way their fairy politics and rivalries play out. Emma Bull, Charles de Lint, and Mercedes Lackey, to name but a few, have all produced notable work in the genre.

And one of the great classic science fiction films, *Forbidden Planet*, is a retelling of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, with Robbie the Robot standing in for both Ariel and Caliban. The retread works admirably, even if *Forbidden Planet*'s writers did decide to punish Dr. Morbius (the Prospero figure) for meddling with alien technology. Shakespeare, by contrast, lets Prospero practice magic without any Calvinist penalties and gives him a happy ending. Interesting to consider that audiences

in 1610 were a bit less distrustful of magic/technology than they were in 1956.

Here, for your edification, are the two earliest surviving films of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, separated in time from us by one hundred and one-hundred-and-one years, respectively.

Vitagraph's *Midsummer*, from 1909, is a brief if reasonably faithful adaptation of Shakespeare's play, with one notable exception: The king of the Fairy Court, Oberon, has been replaced by a character simply named "Penelope." Why? Who the heck knows, although I suspect somebody at Vitagraph felt that Oberon and Titania's marital squabbles were a bit nasty for the tastes of the American moviegoer.

A couple of balustrades in a park somewhere in Brooklyn define the court of Duke Theseus, where the quarrel between rival lovers Lysander and Demetrius is already in progress. For those of you who didn't get the CliffsNotes in high school, both of them want to marry Hermia, short brunette. Hermia loves Lysander, but her father wants her to marry Demetrius. Meanwhile, Demetrius's ex-girlfriend, Helena (tall and blonde) is still hanging around mooning over him. Hermia and Lysander decide to run off to the woods and, er, sort of elope. They stupidly let Helena in on their secret, forgetting that she has such low self-esteem that she'll do *anything* to get some attention from Demetrius, including spilling the beans to him about Hermia and Lysander running away together. They hasten off to the fairy-haunted forest, Demetrius chases after them, and Helena chases after Demetrius.

Change of scene: a bunch of Athenian working yokels are putting on a play to celebrate Duke Theseus's coming marriage. Bottom the Weaver, in complete turn-of-the-century vaudeville-clown makeup, wants all the good roles for himself and is told he can only play the hero in their little thespian effort. The troupe decide to go into the woods that night to rehearse, to avoid being spied on by any rival groups, because they're certain they have a hit! And they do; *Pyramus and Thisbe* is one of the funniest parodies ever written, but, sadly, you won't see much of it in this film.

And now we're in the woods, and we see the fairy queen Titania and...Penelope?...arguing over a briefly glimpsed mortal boy. In the

original story King Oberon wants the kid to be his page, but why Penelope would get involved in a custody battle is left up to your imagination. She decides to play a *really mean trick* on her BFF Titania, as opposed to King Oberon's subtly cruel revenge, and summons Puck to do the whole bit with the flower whose juice, squeezed in someone's eye, will make that person madly dote upon the next live thing it sees. You know. And Puck gets to messing around and anoints the eyes of the four mortal lovers who by this time are lost in the woods, so that the kids get all mixed up. He spots the yokels rehearsing and, just for laughs, transforms Bottom into an ass-headed man. Yokels scream and run away, Bottom goes wandering off very much annoyed, visibly working a string under his chin that makes his animal-mouth open and close as he talks. He stumbles on Queen Titania, who wakes up, sees him, and falls instantly in love with him. She drags him off to her Bower o' Love, but what they do there is never even implied, of course. It's 1909.

Penelope discovers that Puck went a little overboard with the pranks and steps in to correct everything. She and Titania go off arm in arm, presumably to settle on some Greek island together. It's all innocent fun! The lovers, all straightened out now, go off to a happy ending at Theseus's court. Bottom, restored to his clown makeup, goes running home to the other yokels and that's where the film stops, wham—apparently the last reel has gone missing. So we never get to see Titania and Penelope flit around blessing the marriage beds of the lovers, and it's just as well, eh? The dark psychosexual undercurrents in *Midsummer* are gnarly enough without adding a further dimension to them.

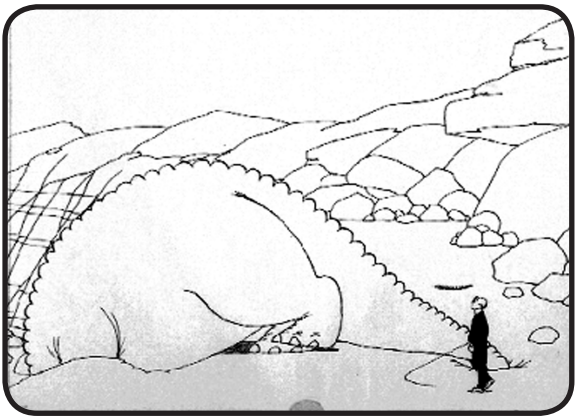
On to *The Tempest*! This one's a Clarendon production from 1908, very brief but full of verve. Here's banished sorcerer and rightful Duke of Milan Prospero, being lowered into a boat with his toddler daughter and his Book of Spells. Here he is landing on a desert island, carrying around the baby and perhaps wondering whether he can summon up a convenience store where he can buy a case of Pampers. Here he is, stumbling over the brutish Caliban and ensorceling him. Here he is, liberating the fairy spirit Ariel from a cloven pine (actually it's an oak). Here's the infant daughter, Miranda, all grown up, doing her hair while

a lustful Caliban creeps up on her. Here's Ariel intervening, changing herself into a monkey to attack and terrify Caliban! Only the monkey won't cooperate, apparently as scared of Caliban as he's pretending to be of it, and it just huddles there until, presumably, the director yelled "CUT! Lose the monkey!"

Next we see the titular Tempest that Prospero has summoned to punish all his enemies, who most unwisely decided to go on a cruise all together. Here's a neat special-effects compound shot, as good as anything in *The Wonderful World of Jules Verne* and pretty darned impressive for 1908, with footage of real waves behind a stage set of rocks and a little model ship reeling to and fro until its mainmast goes overboard. Miranda expostulates, and Prospero agrees to save everyone after all. Here's an even *more* amazing effects shot: Ferdinand, only son of Prospero's enemy, has swum ashore and comes wading out of the surf in full Renaissance costume, still wearing his velvet flat cap with its poofy feather, *not even damp*. Ferdinand and Miranda meet, fall instantly in love, and Prospero makes a half-hearted stab at separating them but in the end realizes that young hormones can't be stopped. He forgives everyone and resurrects the ship. This is a somewhat less-impressive affect, with people climbing on board by stepping over a plywood prow. Caliban seems to be begging to go along, too, as the film runs out.

Both these films can be found on the Image Entertainment DVD *Silent Shakespeare*, along with a number of other ancient adaptations of Shakespeare. It's well worth owning for the historical content, although there are no extras with any kind of information about the films or the processes by which they were preserved and rediscovered. The acting is fairly bad—Helena expressing grief by flinging the back of her hand to her forehead, for example, as she carefully steps around the sleeping Lysander, *whom she hasn't yet noticed*. Still, you have to be impressed by the concise way in which the plots have been edited down, getting a lot of coherent story in a ten-minute film. In a way, they anticipate the Reduced Shakespeare Company.

And it's the stuff that dreams are made of, after all...the stock in trade of every writer of fantasy and science fiction.



All right, all right, I'm sorry I called you a Brontosaur...

GERTIE THE DINOSAURUS

(*Gertie the Dinosaurus)*

AUGUST 3, 2009

Canadian cartoonist Winsor McCay (1867–1934) deserves a chapter of his own in animation history. He wasn't the first artist to complete and exhibit an animated film; his best-known cinematic work, *Gertie the Dinosaurus*, wasn't even his first effort. He did, however, invent keyframe animation, and Gertie holds a place of honor as the first dinosaur on film.

McCay was a well-known newspaper cartoonist at the turn of the century, creating *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* for the *Evening Telegram* and *Little Nemo in Slumberland* for the *New York Herald*. Both strips were surreal dreamscapes, beautifully drawn, in which dream-logic was played out against shifting monumental architecture. (Go Google either strip, and look at some of the detailed pages; I'll wait here. Awesome, ain't they?) *Rarebit Fiend*'s protagonist changed with each strip, the unifying thread for the series being that each dreamer had overindulged

in Welsh rarebit before sleeping and consequently suffered digestive upsets that brought on bizarre and funny nightmares. *Little Nemo*'s protagonist, on the other hand, was on a nocturnal quest: summoned by King Morpheus, he had to reach the gates of Slumberland, where he was to become the playmate of the king's daughter.

In 1911 McCay produced a brief animated feature mixed with live action, usually referred to as *Little Nemo* but in fact titled *Winsor McCay, the Famous Cartoonist of the* N.Y. Herald *and His Moving Comics*. The animated sequences are jaw-droppingly smooth and detailed, featuring some of McCay's characters from *Little Nemo* going through various cycles of motion. McCay followed this a year later with the film *How a Mosquito Operates*, which has only survived in truncated form. In both cases, many audiences refused to believe that they were seeing animated drawings, and McCay was accused of hoaxing. People insisted he must be presenting real actors somehow *disguised to look as drawings*. Maybe he did it with wires! Maybe he did it with mirrors!

Understandably annoyed, McCay chose a subject for his next film that no one could possibly imagine was a live-action fake out: a dinosaur! (Or *dinosaurs*, as the movie posters of the time had it.)

Gertie the Dinosaurus required more than ten thousand drawings to create, each one reproduced by hand by McCay and his assistant in every detail; McCay was animating on rice paper, rather than modern cels, and hadn't worked out that he only needed to redraw the main character, not the unchanging background. Bear this in mind when you watch the film, and marvel at the constancy of McCay's frames. The film was designed as part of a vaudeville show in which a live actor (usually McCay) would greet the audience and then introduce the amazing Gertie, a diplodocus in a primeval setting. The film was designed to enable the actor to appear to interact with Gertie onscreen: McCay would produce an apple, appear to toss it toward Gertie, and palm it as a red-tinted drawing of an apple sailed into frame and was caught by Gertie. In the grand finale, McCay would step behind the screen, appearing to walk into frame as an animated figure, and ride off with Gertie.

By 1914, when *Gertie the Dinosaurus* was first exhibited, McCay had gone to work for William Randolph Hearst, who disapproved of

McCay's stage career. Accordingly, McCay produced a reedited *Gertie* with new live-action footage, and this is the version most people know today. In the final edit, McCay and some of his cronies (including fellow cartoonist George McManus and silent-film comedian John Bunny) are shown out on a joyride in their motorcar. The car suffers a flat tire outside a museum, and while their chauffeur fixes the puncture, the gents go check out the museum. There they behold the skeleton of a diplodocus on display. McCay bets McManus he can bring the extinct creature to life.

Reams of paper and gallons of ink later, McCay invites his friends to a dinner. As they're passing around the port and cigars, McCay makes good on his bet: he sets up his drawing board and draws Gertie. When he's called on this by his friends, he tears off the sheet and the animation begins to run. From here the act proceeds: McCay summons Gertie, who emerges from a cave and prances for the audience. A sea serpent emerges from the lake in the background, now and then; at one point a four-winged dragon flies across the sky. Gertie answers questions with nods and shakes of her head, cries when McCay scolds her, and mischievously tosses a passing mastodon into the lake. She is the first real example of an animated character with a personality. To audiences who had never seen anything of the kind, the effect must have been magical. McCay's sleight of hand with the apple is dropped, apparently after McCay worked out the proportions, and Gertie is instead treated to a "pumpkin." In the end, McCay steps into the action as before and rides away in triumph. The gentlemen decide that McManus has lost the bet and needs to pay for the dinner.

It would have been nice if the triumph had carried over into real life. While *Gertie* was in production, McCay was visited by one John Randolph Bray, who introduced himself as a journalist writing an article on animated features. McCay innocently showed him all the techniques he had developed. Bray, who was not, in fact, a journalist but a rival animator, took careful notes and ran straight out and patented McCay's ideas as his own. Not only did he later attempt to sue McCay for patent infringement, he went so far as to produce a plagiarized version of *Gertie the Dinosaur* and continued to swipe and patent ideas from other animators. As an example of Mean Animator Tricks, Bray

is pretty much unrivaled, though I personally feel that Ralph Bakshi's claiming to have invented the rotoscope comes close.

McCay did, at least, win out in court and received royalties from Bray for years afterward. He went on to produce a few other animated shorts, including three episodes of *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend* and a wartime propaganda film on the sinking of the *Lusitania*. These survive, but what might have been a triumph to surpass *Gertie*, his 1921 film *Centaurs*, exists only as a sad fragment due to poor storage. In what remains, a family of centaurs engage in various activities and end up taking their little boy to visit the grandparents. Both lady centaurs are shown unashamedly bare-breasted (the grandma centaur wears only a pair of pince-nez spectacles) and it's unknown whether *Centaurs* was something McCay actually finished and meant to exhibit or whether it was only an experimental work. It certainly shows McCay was once again trailblazing, attempting for the first time to match mouth motion with spoken syllables. We can only lament what crumbled to silver nitrate dust in a garage in Long Island.

Gertie, however, continues to grin and stamp her immense feet and dance, all complete in her little antediluvian world, almost a century on. There have been various VHS and DVD collections of McCay's existing work, most recently from Image Entertainment, but most can be viewed on YouTube as well. Go visit the old girl! She's the matriarch of a long line that has trailed through the Lost World and Skull Island, through the Valley of Gwangi to Jurassic Park. Her descendants aren't nearly as friendly or biddable, but Gertie will always give you a smile.

I can show you the—oh, look, I can see your house from up here...

THE THIEF OF BAGDAD

(*The Thief of Bagdad*)

AUGUST 10, 2009

Okay, this one you have *got* to see. But first, a word about...Orientalism.

You will hear Orientalism condemned as a racist, patronizing, colonial way of looking at certain other cultures, in which the men are weak and treacherous because they're fundamentally inferior to the clear-eyed Aryan hero and the women are all exotic beauties with no morals. Pull a harmless little prank like stealing the ruby eye out of some heathen idol and some heathen devil will come crawling into your tent at night, dagger gripped between his filthy teeth, what?

Appalling, of course, and today any writer who even attempts to write a parody of this kind of thing had better be damned careful. But...

There was once such a thing as Romantic Orientalism, and it was entirely different. It was fostered by the *Thousand and One Nights*, wherein the cities were breathtakingly beautiful; the heroes bold, bronzed, and daring; the maidens virtuous and clever. The

religion of Islam was treated with respect. There were magical things like flying carpets, and there were peacocks and apes and gardens with fountains and, and, well, a whole lot of gold and purple splashed all over the place. If there were wicked viziers, there were also kindly caliphs and wise mullahs. Romantic Orientalism was fascinated by the color and excitement of a powerful culture and nearly always approached its subject with love.

So let us accept that we're dealing with a well-intentioned fairy tale here, OK, and not get all bent out of shape? Because if you don't run out immediately and rent the 1924 version of *The Thief of Bagdad*, you will be denying yourself some serious viewing pleasure.

The first thing we see is Night in the Desert, under a million stars, and a holy man is explaining to a small ragamuffin that "Happiness must be Earned." The message spells itself out in the stars, and presumably the holy man tells the story that follows. Next we get a quote from the Koran praising Allah, next a quote from the introduction to the *Thousand and One Nights*, and then the first intertitle tells us we're about to see "Bagdad, dream city of the ancient East," which is such a different place from the Baghdad we see in the evening news it doesn't even bear discussion. Moving right along...

Exotic traders are leading camels, wealthy merchants are going to and fro, everyone's wearing huge turbans with feathers, and everyone is dwarfed by gigantic architecture. The Bagdad set took up something like six and a half acres on the Formosa lot, but I haven't seen any figures on how far *up* it went; it must have been visible for miles, in 1924-era Hollywood. At the back is our titular hero, pretending to be asleep on a rock ledge over a...er...actually it's a drinking fountain a lot like the ones in your local grammar school yard. As various citizens come up to drink, the Thief steals their purses. In fact, he'll steal anything from anyone, as we see subsequently.

Douglas Fairbanks was 41 when he made this film, and it shows. There is a close-up shot of his sleeping face that looks distinctly airbrushed to make him look younger, but the fact is that in waking motion his is the hard, calculating face of an older man. Fairbanks's body, however, was still slim and perfectly toned, perfectly controlled. You don't particularly like him as he makes his thieving rounds, but

you can believe this is a street thug who will do anything to survive, a sensual amoral animal. His emotions are primitive (and so is Fairbanks's acting style), but somehow it all comes together.

The Thief's outrages mount, until he breaks into a mosque and mocks the white-robed holy man, denying Paradise and proclaiming that you only get on in life by taking what you want. This nearly gets him killed by the outraged faithful, but the holy man is apparently of the All-Merciful and Compassionates party rather than the vengeful sort, because he holds the crowds back. Clearly he can see something worth saving in the Thief.

Next the Thief decides to break into the Caliph's palace. But first we zip off to China to see the Mongol Prince (splendidly played by Japanese actor Sojin Kamiyama) who intends to capture the city of Bagdad and wouldn't mind getting his hands on the Caliph's beautiful daughter either. He may be supposed to be a Mongol but he comes off far more like Fu Manchu than Genghis Khan. He states that what he wants, he takes, putting him at exactly the same moral level as the Thief. He is, however, a lot smarter. We learn that a bunch of princes from other lands have been invited to Bagdad to vie for the hand of the Princess, and the Mongol Prince decides this dovetails neatly with his invasion plans.

Meanwhile, back in Bagdad, the Thief breaks into the palace, makes his way to the Princess's bedroom, and falls in love with the sleeping Princess. He also encounters her alert serving girl (and Mongolian double agent) played by Anna May Wong, who raises the alarm. The Thief escapes with the Princess's slipper and the lustful intent to kidnap her. When the foreign princes arrive, he steals fancy clothes and a horse and presents himself as one of them. His blinding smile captivates the Princess from afar. She doesn't care for the other suitors—the Indian Prince looks bad-tempered, the Persian Prince is way fat (and played by French actress Mathilde Comont, with an extra-eunuchy flair), and the Mongol Prince is just scary. The Mongolian serving girl recognizes the Thief and informs her Prince. The Thief, meanwhile, breaks into the Princess's rooms again and learns that she has fallen for him in a big way. He can't bring himself to go through with his plan of drugging her and carrying her off—in fact, he get

smacked upside the head by Love in one of those Complete Change of Character moments.

Exposed as an impostor by the Mongolian Prince, the Thief gets flogged and thrown out of the palace. He wanders off to the mosque, where the holy man welcomes him and sends him off on a quest that will transform him. And now the film *really* gets into gear.

The Princess, who is desolated her sweetie isn't in the running anymore, cannily sets her three despised suitors quests of their own: each must travel off and find a fabulously rare treasure and return with it "by the seventh moon." Cool! So now we have two competing sets of quests! The three suitors ride out, though the Mongol Prince thoughtfully leaves instructions for his army to infiltrate the city over the next seven months, so that he'll have twenty thousand troops ready to hand when he returns.

If romance and spiritual redemption aren't really your thing, you will at least love the remaining hour, which is full of action, adventure, and giant monsters. We go straight to a Defile in the Mountains of Dread Adventure, where the Thief encounters the Hermit of the Defile, who tells him that many have entered the Defile but none have ever returned. Our hero goes bravely on and fights his way through a realm of fire. He travels farther and encounters a dragon...well, it's a hand puppet actually, and not very convincing with our hero matted in via whatever they used for green screen before the days of color films. But next there's the genuinely creepy Cavern of Enchanted Trees...

Meanwhile the Princes are scoring big. Persia finds a magic carpet. India, obviously nonobservant in his religion unless he's a Moghul, sends one of his lackeys climbing up a giant statue of...Shiva, maybe? The lackey chips out the all-seeing crystal ball that forms the pupil of the idol's left eye. You know, that never ends well, does it? In this case the lackey slips and falls screaming to his death, but the Prince manages to retrieve the crystal ball. Meanwhile, the Mongol has his men break into a sacred shrine and capture a golden apple reputed to cure the sick and raise the dead. He has an innocent bystander bitten by a deadly snake so he can test the apple, and it works. Then he sends word on ahead to his double agent to have the Princess poisoned. (You have to admire this guy for his planning. No little detail overlooked!)

Back to the Thief: he keeps charging through deadly dangers, including a lengthy underwater sequence so realistic I *still* can't tell you how it was done. He just keeps fighting on, resisting temptation and killing monsters, and gets to the prize at last—a chest full of magic something-or-other that provides him with anything he needs. Back he goes to Bagdad on a fast stallion, over what looks suspiciously like second-unit footage of the Pismo Dunes, but *meanwhile...*

The three Princes meet at a roadside caravanserai, and each shows off his loot. They see in the crystal ball that the Princess is at death's door. All three hop the flying carpet and zoom to her bedside. The Mongol cures her with the golden apple. She smiles and explains the scores are still tied, due to the fact that it took all three magical objects to save her. At this point the Mongol trumps everyone with his concealed army. There's a battle for Bagdad! *Will our hero ride to the rescue in time?* Him and what army?

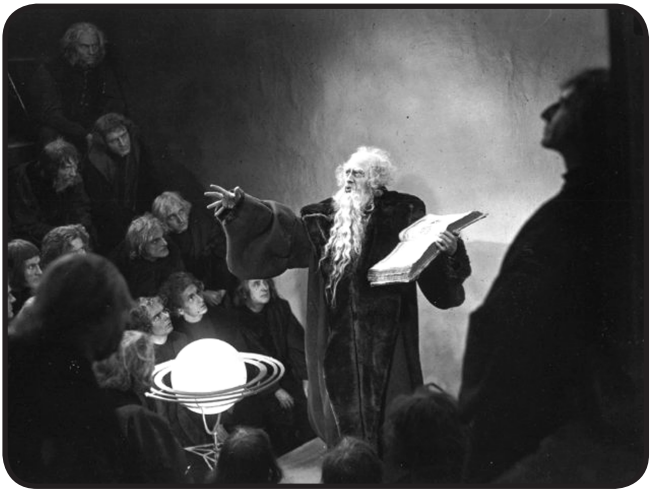
The Thief of Bagdad was not a commercial success, due primarily to the fact that it cost more to make than any film before it—$2,000,000, which was pretty hard to recoup at the 1924 box offices. Every buck shows, though, and as the years have passed its virtues have come to be more and more appreciated. In fact, the American Film Institute has voted it one of the top 10 fantasy films of all time. It is now in the public domain, and, accordingly, you will need to be careful which version you watch, because there are a lot of thoroughly crappy prints floating around and this film deserves reverent treatment.

Image Entertainment provides a reasonably good print, an early (1975) restoration with little missing footage and a musical accompaniment on theater organ by Gaylord Carter that creates a great 1920s vibe. Your very best bet, however, is the DVD released by ever-reliable Kino Video. It's pristine, it's a great transfer, it has beaucoup extras, and the musical score is derived from the original 1924 cue sheet. It's also available in a boxed set with some of Fairbanks's other great swashbuckling films.

We'll never see the like of *Thief of Bagdad* again—hell, I doubt whether it would even be possible to make something like Disney's *Aladdin* nowadays—and maybe that world of purple and gold and nightingales singing in pomegranate trees was only ever a fantasy,

propagated by Western moviemakers who, if they were even aware that crusaders had once besieged Jerusalem, assumed it was all long since forgiven and forgotten, because who holds grudges for a thousand years?

It's still a keen movie.



Forget the gag caption this week. Look at the composition! The lighting!

MURNAU'S FAUST

(*Faust*)

AUGUST 17, 2009

For those of you who thought F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* was his greatest film, I have news for you: his *Faust* blows it out of the water.

A little background: the Faust legend dates back as far as the 16th century and may have its roots in even earlier tales about the dangers of doing business with devils. Once codified as the Faust legend, though, its subject matter proved to be immensely popular. Like Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Tale of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Faust* was a new archetype, a story that could be told and retold with endless variations to make different points. Depending on the version, Faust might be an old fool, a fearless seeker after truth, a heretic, or a romantic hero. *Faust* has inspired a number of operas, one of which, Gounod's *Faust*, was once the most-performed opera anywhere. Time has dimmed its charms a bit, but Mephistopheles' serenade "Vous qui faites l'endormie" is still one of the most creepily romantic things I've

ever heard. Like *Jekyll and Hyde*, too, *Faust* was a favorite subject for early filmmakers. Several versions were made prior to Murnau's 1926 film, but the only one I have been able to locate is a very brief trick film from 1911, viewable on YouTube if you're interested. It will not impress you.

So Murnau was not selecting a particularly original subject for his last German film when he decided to adapt Goethe's version of the Faust legend. What he did with it, however, broke new ground in filmmaking.

The story is simple, with a medieval mindset: the devil and an archangel, replaying somewhat the book of Job, bet on the behavior of the aged and benevolent scholar Faust. If the devil can corrupt him, the devil wins the Earth. The devil therefore afflicts Faust's village with the plague. Neither Faust's knowledge of medicine nor his prayers can save anyone, and in despair he summons up the devil, who promptly gets down to business. Faust can now save the dying, but it turns out Mephisto's gift has that vampire clause that says Faust will now flinch away from any crucifixes he sees. This tips off the townsfolk that he's in league with you-know-who, and they stone him out of the village. Faust is about to drink poison when Mephisto offers him renewed youth and all the par-tee he wants. What Faust wants, once he's transformed, is the most beautiful woman in the world, so off they fly to the Duchess of Parma, who currently holds the title of Hottest of the Hot, and debauch her.

A whole bunch of debauches later, Faust is feeling gloomy and unsatisfied. Instead of another party, he wants a glimpse of the little hamlet in which he grew up. When Mephisto obliges him, Faust is overcome with nostalgia and wants to go back to visit. In the crowd of happy peasants making their way to Easter mass, he spots the innocent girl Gretchen. He's in love! Mephisto assures him he can have the girl without harming her in any way, which is, of course, a lie: as a result of their tryst Gretchen's mother dies, her brother is murdered, she bears an illegitimate baby who dies in a snowdrift, and she herself gets burned at the stake. Faust, a bit belatedly, realizes she's in a spot of trouble and rushes back in time to die at the stake with her. I win, says Mephisto! No you don't, says the archangel, because Love Conquered.

In case you're thinking you're not going to waste your time on this sort of thing, I urge you to reconsider. The plot is immaterial. What Murnau does with the camera is decidedly not.

Let's start with the opening, showing three of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse showering their horrors on the Earth. This, and a few other scenes in *Faust*, clearly inspired Disney's animators for the "Night on Bald Mountain" sequence in *Fantasia.* The devil looms, shadowing the world with huge black wings and glowing eyes. Or what about the stark beauty of the scene in which Faust attempts to save a peasant girl's dying mother? Or the scene in which Faust summons the devil, complete with a keen special-effects storm? Or the marvelously scary first appearance of Mephisto, as a toadlike peasant who solemnly raises his cap to Faust and, when Faust flees, slowly turns his head and follows him with glowing eyes?

If these don't impress you, I defy you not to be overwhelmed at the scene in which Mephisto and the rejuvenated Faust fly across Europe, in what must have been one of the longest tracking shots over the longest and most complicated miniature landscape models ever made. *How did Murnau get that shot?* Or what about the elephants at the Court of Parma? Watch them closely. A lot of people have found the interlude with Mephisto's mock-courtship of Gretchen's sleazy Aunt Marthe a pointless diversion, but it's in the original story, after all, and serves the purpose of sly subtext on Faust's breathlessly selfish courtship of Gretchen. And the scene in which Gretchen stands weeping in the stocks, and the camera lingers on each peasant face in the crowd and each individual reaction, from compassion to distinterested curiosity to spiteful giggling...

A note on babies dying in the cold: Murnau originally wanted Lillian Gish to play Gretchen, possibly on the basis of her performance in D. W. Griffith's 1920 film *Way Down East*, in which Gish plays a girl similarly betrayed whose baby dies and who ends up unconscious on an ice floe speeding down a raging river, rescued at the last moment by the hero. Gish refused the role of Gretchen unless she could have her own photographer, which was a deal-breaker for Murnau. I think it was just as well for all concerned. Little Camilla Horn was a fine actress as Gretchen, and the scene in which she dreamily rocks her child to

sleep in the snow curdles the blood. Gish, in the same role, might have provoked snickers in the audience. *(What, you lost* another *baby?)*

All the actors in *Faust* put in a good day's work, in fact, most notably Emil Jannings as Mephisto. Gösta Ekman in the title role is somewhat less effective playing his younger self, but much more so as the aged philosopher. Even all the unnamed extras have wonderful faces. Murnau seemed to hand-pick every visual element in *Faust*, as though he selected fragments of stained glass for one glorious window.

Interestingly, he edited about five different versions of *Faust* for various international markets; the American version even contained a joke about Prohibition. Your best bet in viewing nowadays, as always, is to go with the Kino International 2-disc version.

Altogether *Faust* scores over *Nosferatu* in a number of ways. It's a more thoughtful film, more subtle, with much better acting and camera work; Murnau had mastered his craft by this time. When he'd finished it, Murnau took his skills to Hollywood, where he directed the great classic silent *Sunrise.* That he ended his career prematurely, smacking into a telephone pole on Pacific Coast Highway under possibly scandalous circumstances, is a tragic irony that doubtless provoked a gleeful smirk from Mephisto.

Another one where any caption would be wasted...

DER MÜDE TOD

(*Der müde Tod*)

AUGUST 24, 2009

It was Alfred Hitchcock's favorite film. It inspired Luis Buñuel to become a filmmaker. And, unless you're a dedicated silent-film buff, I'll bet you've never even heard of it.

I refer to Fritz Lang's 1921 masterpiece, *Der müde Tod*, known where English is spoken as *Destiny.* "Weary Death" is a much better title, but if you're planning to buy or rent this one, look under the English name. And, thank all the cinematic gods, you *can* buy or rent it, because *Destiny* has survived the ravages of time intact and reasonably pristine. Because its story is told with the utter simplicity of a folktale, it has survived changes in taste as well.

If supernatural romance is your thing—and I'm not just talking to you little gothgirls or *Twilight* fans, but also to anyone of my generation who used to stay up late to catch 1947's *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* or *Portrait of Jennie*—then *Destiny* is for you.

And, gentlemen, before you run for the exits, consider my opening lines: Hitchcock's favorite film. Buñuel's inspiration. Sure you don't want to stick around and find out why? And were you at all impressed by Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* by the way? You were? I thought so. Sit down.

Somewhere in a folktale Europe, a coach rattles along a dusty highway. Into the road walks a gaunt man with burning eyes, who raises his staff in a commanding gesture. The coach stops. The man steps inside. The other passengers—a young peasant couple, obviously very much in love—regard the stranger uneasily.

We see next a little village. We meet its mayor and other authorities, and then we see the village gravedigger, hard at work. Looking up, he sees the gaunt stranger, who asks him whether the property adjoining the graveyard is for sale. When the gravedigger answers that the village council has reserved the land for a future extension of the cemetery, the stranger goes off to see the mayor about buying the land anyway. The mayor, reluctant, asks why the stranger could possibly want the land. The stranger answers that he wishes to make himself a garden where he may rest, because he is weary of traveling. He is willing to pay a fabulous sum in gold, and so the land is deeded over to him. The villagers are dismayed, however, when the man puts up a high wall completely enclosing the plot of land. No one can find an entrance or exit anywhere, although its builder can apparently come and go inside at will.

This wall, by the way, is one of the first great images in the film. It bewilders the eye. It appears to be a random collection of stones, but in certain shots you would think it was semi-transparent and you could almost glimpse *something* beyond...in other shots there seem to be patterns in the stones, symbols that you almost recognize. And yet I'd swear no cinematic effects were used. Just a few marks in plasterwork, creatively presented with light and shadow. The essence of brilliant illusion.

The young lovers arrive at the village inn and order refreshment. The lady of the house, charmed by them, brings them a sort of honeymoon goblet from which they must both drink at the same time. After some giggling and spillage they manage, but the mood is

shattered when the gaunt stranger sits down at their table uninvited. He solemnly toasts them with a glass of beer, which a moment later appears to have turned into an hourglass. The maiden is terrified. The honeymoon goblet falls and breaks. The lady of the house takes the girl into the kitchen until she can calm down a bit. When the girl returns to the front room, however, she finds the table deserted. Not especially frightened at first, she runs out, asking whether anyone has seen her young man, and is told by several witnesses that he walked away with the gaunt stranger. Her search becomes more and more desperate; by nightfall she is weeping alone by the high wall when she sees a procession of specters walking toward her. They are not presented in any horrific way, but among them is her lover. She watches, terrified, as they pass one by one through the wall and vanish. She collapses.

The village apothecary, out digging roots by the light of the moon, finds her and brings her back to his shop, where he bustles off to make her a nice cup of tea. She snatches a bottle of poison from the apothecary's shelf and is about to drink when—

She's suddenly on a staircase ascending into formless brightness. The gaunt stranger meets her there, gently asking why she has come when it isn't her time. She begs to have her lover returned, and the stranger explains that isn't possible; his allotted time has ended. The stranger shows her a room full of burning candles. Each is a human life, and each life ends when its flame gutters out. She pleads for any kind of second chance, and the stranger is willing to grant her one. He shows her three candles, each one close to burning out. If she can prevent the deaths of even one of the souls represented by those candles, her wish will be granted.

Now follow the three stories within the main narrative. The first is set in Persia, with a Caliph's sister trying to save her European lover; the second is set in Venice during the Renaissance, with a noblewoman trying to prevent the murder of her lover by her jealous betrothed; the third is a comic interlude, set in a fairy-tale China, where the two young assistants of an old magician must escape the emperor's court. All these are beautifully filmed and well acted. Look for the always-formidable Rudolf Klein-Rogge as a powerful Venetian lord, summoning his lackeys with a couple of negligent hand gestures, exactly like a modern

mafia don snapping his fingers.

In its ending the film returns to the perfect rhythms of an old fairy tale, and that's all I'll say to avoid spoilers. But oh, how I'd love to see what Guillermo del Toro could do with a remake, remembering the gravity and hallucinatory quality of *Pan's Labyrinth.*

Douglas Fairbanks Sr. was impressed enough with *Destiny* to buy the American distribution rights; he then withheld the film from the American market until after his own *The Thief of Bagdad* had completed its theatrical run. The irony is that there is nothing especially fairy tale or *Arabian Nights*–ish about the Persian sequence in *Destiny.* Watch it and see if you don't agree. Oddly enough, I couldn't find any evidence that Kino International has released a restoration on *Destiny*, but until and unless it does, you'll still be well served by the release available from Image Entertainment—nice crisp print, good musical score. No extras whatsover, unfortunately, and they would be particularly welcome.

Meanwhile...anybody out there got Guillermo de Toro's phone number? E-mail address? Anything?

Why, no need to get upthet, thir...jutht take two athpirinth and call me in the morning.

THE BELLS

(*The Bells)*

AUGUST 31, 2009

The Bells (1926) is an early example of films-claiming-to-be-based-on-a-work-by-Edgar-Allan-Poe-but-not-actually. Universal cranked out a few in the 1930s, generally pairing up Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi; Hammer turned out several in the 1950s, with Vincent Price as various tortured protagonists or villains. Of all of these, *The Bells* has possibly the most tenuous connection with Poe, because it's really a film treatment of a fairly famous turn-of-the-century play, *Le Juif Polonaise*, and Poe's titular poem is simply a rhythmic tour de force about bells ringing. There's a properly Poe-like theme of agonizing remorse following gruesome murder, though, complete with spectral accusers, so it rates a decent four out of five ravens on the Poe-o-meter.

It's still one strange kettle of fish...

Initially *The Bells* looks as though it's going to be a good old-fashioned melodrama. In a quaint little Alsatian village, we meet

Mathias, the tavern keeper (Lionel Barrymore). Mathias also owns the village mill and lime kilns and is actively campaigning to be appointed Burgomaster, but he's really a spendthrift in debt up to his eyebrows. The nasty holder of the mortgage stalks around sneering at Mathias's pretensions, only too eager to throw him out on his ear once the debt comes due—*unless* he's granted the hand of Mathias' pretty daughter in marriage, nya-ha-haaa.

Mathias won't have any of that. He's too soft-hearted, and anyway his daughter is in love with the handsome young captain of the village gendarmes. He goes right on giving away free drinks to the Burgomaster-appointing committee and buying presents he can't afford. Ruin is looming on the horizon...but first a traveling fair comes through town, and with it a Mesmerist, impressively played by Boris Karloff in full Dr. Caligari getup. The Mesmerist has all kinds of powers of hypnosis, levitation, and whatnot, but most particularly claims to be able to look into the hearts of men and get them to confess their secret crimes. He seems to fixate on Mathias, standing in the crowd, and summons him onstage, but Mathias departs hurriedly. A fairground fortune-teller offers to read his palm, and he sits for his fortune, but after a mere glance she jumps back and orders him out of her tent, making signs against Evil. *Jeez,* thinks Mathias, *all I did was try to buy a few votes!*

Fast forward to Christmastime, and Mathias is throwing a huge Christmas party at the tavern for all of his pals and neighbors. No expense has been spared, but Mathias is sweating bullets: he isn't Burgomaster yet, and his debt is coming due soon. And then—in walks a stranger.

He is Baruch Koweski, a Polish Jew and merchant, and rather than the usual fairly offensive silent-era stereotype you might expect, he resembles Santa Claus, smiling as he shakes the snowflakes from his coat and wishes peace upon the tavern merrymakers. He's been traveling a long way, it's snowing hard, and he'd like to thaw out by the fire for an hour or two. Mathias welcomes him in and pours him a drink, as the other guests begin to wander home. He invites Koweski to get drunk with him, but Koweski declines politely and, standing to get a gold piece out of his money belt, pays for his drink. Mathias

can't take his eyes off that fat, full money belt! Koweski has apparently had an extremely successful sales trip. When Koweski rises to leave Mathias buttons up his guest's coat with all solicitude—wouldn't want anything to happen to all that lovely gold, would we?

The minute Koweski climbs back into his sleigh and drives off—sleigh bells ring-ting-tingling, no less—Mathias grabs an axe and runs out through the blizzard to cut him off at the pass. Whack, crash, blood on the snow, and Koweski shakes the sleigh bells in his death throes, providing an auditory cue that will, of course, return to drive Mathias maaaad with guilt.

He steals the money belt and disposes of Koweski's body in a lime kiln. Next day Mathias announces an uncle has died and left him a huge legacy. His troubles are over! He pays off the mortgage, settles a big dowry on his daughter for her forthcoming marriage, and gets appointed Burgomaster. The murder is discovered, due to a couple of things Mathias forgot about, like leaving Koweski's axe-split fur hat in the snow; but as the Burgomaster and father-in-law of the village cop, Mathias is in a great position to cover it up. Just as it looks as though Mathias has gotten away with it, Koweski's brother shows up offering a reward to anyone who can solve the murder. Not only that, he's brought the Mesmerist with him, in his capacity as forensic psychic.

The Mesmerist clearly knows exactly whodunit, giving Mathias long brooding stares and one of those bloodcurdling smiles Karloff did so well, like a wound opening in his stony face. His presence in the village, plus the fact that Koweski's ghost starts appearing and following Mathias around sadly, and don't forget those phantom sleigh bells ringing, begin to drive Mathias over the edge. There are a number of creepy special effects, including one surreal scene in which Mathias and the dead man sit down to a card game—Mathias dealing out real cards, the ghost picking up transparent ones. The noose tightens and tightens, Mathias loses more and more of his sanity, and then—well, I won't tell you the outcome, but it's one of the most outrageous cop-outs you'll ever see on film, as well as being theologically unsound.

The Bells is still worth watching, however. It's sort of like a dark mirror image of *It's a Wonderful Life*, if Lionel Barrymore had played George Bailey instead of Mr. Potter, and George had decided to murder

somebody rather than throw himself off a bridge. It's great to see both Barrymore and Karloff so young, too. In addition, the surviving print is clean and crisp and a joy to watch. Image Entertainment is your only choice here, with a nice musical score played by Eric Beheim conducting the William Pratt Players (that's an in-joke, for those of you who know who William Henry Pratt was).

As usual with Image, there are no extras at all for *The Bells*, but oddly enough, one remarkable bit of cinematic lagniappe was added to the DVD: the truncated American release of René Clair's silent SF classic, *Paris Qui Dort*, presented here under the title *The Crazy Ray,* with English titles by Morrie Ryskind, who scripted for the Marx Brothers. *Paris Qui Dort* is a surreal little gem, well worth a column of its own. Meet me here next week for some Eiffel Tower madness!

One and two and con-ga!

PARIS QUI DORT

(*Paris Qui Dort*)

SEPTEMBER 7, 2009

Although 1925's *Paris Qui Dort* is not, as some exceptionally forgetful film historians have claimed, the first French science-fiction film (Hello—Georges Méliès?), it's certainly a seminal work. Its descendants include a couple of classic *Twilight Zone* episodes, and its imagery is echoed in later end-of-the-world films like *On the Beach.* Yet *Paris Qui Dort* is short and sweet, a surreal little confection, slapstick frosting over a disturbing center. It's a remarkable maiden effort for a young filmmaker, even one as talented as René Clair.

As the film opens, it's dawn in the City of Light, and a young night watchman emerges, yawning, from his shelter up on the third level of the Eiffel Tower. A vast silence greets him; this is a silent film anyway, of course, but Clair still manages to convey the immense unnatural absence of the sounds of a living city. Albert, the watchman, rubs his eyes and stares down in disbelief. The streets and parks are all deserted;

there isn't a soul moving anywhere below him in the brilliant morning light. Bewildered, he descends through the labyrinth of the tower and emerges at last at ground level.

As the sun creeps higher and Albert wanders through the empty streets, we get a lovely look at prewar Paris. With their human context removed, the streets and landmarks take on personalities of their own, almost become another world. At last he finds a solitary figure, a ragpicker frozen in the act of going through a trash can. He attempts to speak to the stranger, who might as well be a wax mannequin. Albert reacts with nervous humor, treating the whole situation as a joke. He wanders on and sees a thief frozen in the act of running with a stolen necklace, with a gendarme frozen in close pursuit. Albert removes the necklace from the thief's hand and tucks it into his own pocket, and we see exactly how long it takes for notions of a social contract to fall by the wayside in a disaster. Why not help himself, if the world has gone crazy?

More people are encountered, in solitary immobility—a well-dressed drunk leaning against a wall, a taxi driver asleep at the wheel of his cab. All the clocks have stopped at 3:25, and it becomes plain why there are so few people in evidence: these are all night wanderers. The rest of Paris is dormant indoors. Exhausted and scared now, Albert collapses on a bench and puts his hands over his eyes, envisioning the crowded streets, the automobiles and horse-drawn carriages, the throngs of people. They vanish, however, as soon as he uncovers his eyes. He can't wake up from this dream.

And then, Albert glimpses an automobile in motion. He tries to signal to the motorists and finally commandeers a taxi and drives off in pursuit (the taxi driver makes no protest as he's shoved into the back seat like so much luggage). Albert catches up to the other car, which is full of people: a pilot, a wealthy businessman, a beautiful girl, and a Scotland Yard detective handcuffed to the petty thief he has been transporting. Explanations are exchanged and Albert learns that the others were all passengers on a plane that landed shortly after 4:00 a.m., only to find that the airport crew—and everyone else—is in the same state of immobility as the citizens of Paris. The party works out that whatever it was that happened at 3:25 only affected people at

ground level, because neither the plane's passengers nor Albert up on the top level of the tower were affected.

The businessman insists they rush off to see whether his young mistress is all right. Arriving at her apartment, they find the door locked—apparently the businessman hasn't got a key—and so the thief offers his expertise. The detective uncuffs him, and the thief gets the door open, but once they get inside, the businessman finds his mistress frozen in the act of entertaining a gentleman caller with whom she seems to be on affectionate terms. Everyone has a good, if slightly uneasy, laugh at the businessman's expense.

Off they all go to a nightclub in Montmartre, petrified in dreary late-night revelry: a couple of partiers in paper hats and their lady friends, waiters, an orchestra in mid-swing. Most of them look as though they were already asleep when the catastrophe struck. Our survivors help themselves to champagne; more social order is flung to the winds as they drink. One of the clubbers is relieved of her jewelry, and it is presented as a gift to the group's only woman, in an indication of rivalries to come. The thief suggests they all go out and loot the banks and department stores of Paris. Why not, after all? The detective enthusiastically seconds the motion—so much for law and order! The businessman alone attempts to leave some money in a waiter's hands as they leave. The thief ducks back and snatches it, not having realized yet that money has lost any practical value in this new world.

Having helped themselves to food, wine, fancy clothes, and luxury items, the survivors withdraw to an Olympian existence on the top level of the Eiffel Tower, picnicking amid the clouds and perching like overdressed gargoyles on the girders. Paradise quickly crumbles, however, under their mounting sense of ennui and the fact that they number five men to one woman. In one scene the girl wanders restlessly around the tower platforms, followed by the edgy men all in a line like mallard ducks. Jealous quarrels and violence erupt, as do suicidal acrobatics a thousand feet above the pavement. What is left of civilization is about to collapse when a radio transmission is heard coming from the transmitter room—*somebody else is alive out there!* Frantic, our heroes—such as they are—descend to street level and pile into the car, speeding through the empty streets in search of

the person sending the SOS...

Unlike a lot of silent films that have survived only in mutilated form, *Paris Qui Dort* has actually been padded out. The longest version clocks in at 54 minutes, but this one was unauthorized by René Clair and contains a lot of extended takes that add nothing to the story. The shortest version is the American release (under the alternative titles *The Crazy Ray* and *At 3:25*) at just about 19 minutes. Clair tinkered with the editing over his lifetime, and his final definitive version runs about 30 minutes. All prints are in good condition; *Paris Qui Dort* has aged well in just about every respect, especially the cinematography by Paul Guichard and Maurice Desfassiaux.

Where can you find it? The authorized director's cut is included on the Criterion Region 1 release of Clair's early sound film *Under the Roofs of Paris*, but you can watch the American version on Image Entertainment's release of last week's topic, *The Bells*. Just why it was thrown in with a supernatural melodrama I've no idea, but the contrast between the two is entertaining. The American edit manages to keep the plot nicely coherent and intact, also, which could be fairly rare—*Metropolis* was not only butchered in its stateside release, its plot was entirely rewritten. Whether you see *Paris Qui Dort* or *The Crazy Ray*, I guarantee its light and air, its empty Paris full of silence under silence, will haunt your memory long after its human protagonists are forgotten.

And I'll buy you a silk dress, Mama, and all the bananas you can eat...

STRONG & SILENT, DAY 1

(*Tarzan of the Apes*)

SEPTEMBER 14, 2009

When a Grand Master like Fritz Leiber writes an authorized adventure featuring Tarzan (a.k.a. Lord Greystoke), and no less an authority than Philip José Farmer connects everyone's favorite Ape Man with the Wold Newton universe, we can justifiably consider his films in this space. The original 1912 novel by Edgar Rice Burroughs reads at times like a silent-film plot; it's no wonder that the Lord of the Apes leaped onto the silver screen early and often.

Perhaps the first filmed version of Tarzan's story was the best; it's certainly the most faithful to Burroughs's original book. *Tarzan of the Apes*, from 1918, and where it diverges only makes the plot more plausible than Burroughs's original, with an interesting racial subtext.

In this version, John Clayton, Lord Greystoke is sent by the British government to deal with the problem of Arab slave traders who are preying on the African population. His wife insists on coming along,

but they clearly should have plunked out the extra cash for a couple of Cunard tickets: off the coast of Africa the crew of their tramp freighter mutinies and kills the captain. One sailor named Binns speaks up for Lord and Lady Greystoke, managing to get them marooned rather than murdered outright. He jumps ship himself, intending to come to their aid, but is captured by slave traders and dragged away into captivity, along with several unfortunate Africans.

Left to their own devices, the Claytons build themselves a log cabin and settle down to produce an heir. Their son is born but, unlike in most versions of Tarzan's origins, he is a toddler, rather than a newborn, when his parents die. It's an interesting departure, given what we know now—but didn't know in 1918—about the learning difficulties experienced by feral children who were never exposed to the human language.

Cut to the Unspecified-Ape-of-Some-Kind tribe, where (shades of Disney) Papa Kerchak is furious with grief over the death of his son, and Mama Kala is in deep mourning. They break into the Clayton cabin and kill Lord Greystoke, in their impetuous simian way. Kala leaves her dead child in the crib and carries off little Tarzan. Unanswerable trivia question here: Who was the first screen actor to portray Tarzan? We'll never know, because the little actors cast as the newborn and toddler Tarzan received no screen credit. The first *known* actor was child star Gordon Griffith, whom we see next playing happily in extended sequences in the jungle. Griffith was really a very talented little actor, aptly conveying a dangerous sense of mischief and swagger. He particularly shines in the scene in which he first notices his reflection in a pond and realizes he looks nothing like his chimpanzee playmate. He steals clothing from a villager, breaks into his parents' cabin and explores, and carries off a knife.

Meanwhile, poor sailor Binns has been dragged around in a slave coffle all these years. He manages to escape at last, and goes looking for the Claytons, hoping to keep his promise to help them. He finds the cabin, sees the Claytons' skeletons, and realizes he's ten years too late. At first he assumes the baby died, too, but then notices the prints young Tarzan has left in the dust and realizes the boy has survived. Tarzan finds him and for a while Binns is his mentor, teaching him to

read from the books in the cabin—again, much more plausible than in the original story, in which Tarzan teaches *himself* reading from first principles. Binns attempts to take the boy to the coast with him, intending to get him home to England, but they are attacked by slave traders and separated. Tarzan returns to the jungle; Binns steals a canoe and paddles back to the UK.

Flash forward another ten years and here's big Tarzan, and I mean *big*. He's had too many second helpings of zebra. An actor named Stellan Windrow was originally cast as the adult Tarzan, and actually put in five weeks' worth of camera time before quitting to go off and enlist for the First World War. Elmo Lincoln was hastily hired as his replacement, and most of Windrow's footage was discarded and reshot. Not all, though. Lincoln is a bit, er, beefier than we customarily think of Tarzan as being and in fact was too hefty to manage the vine-swinging and tree-scampering scenes, so Windrow's shots were used. Life for Tarzan is pretty dull, except for when a hunter from the local tribe shoots and kills Kala. Tarzan chases the guy down and kills him. The villagers (women in full *National Geographic* toplessness, by the way) leave offerings to placate the white demon of the woods. Fortunately Tarzan is distracted by the arrival of Jane and company.

Here's another improvement on the original story: as Burroughs told it, the Porter-Clayton expedition wound up in Africa after *another* mutiny stranded them there. Ditching this coincidence, the screenplay has them coming to Africa specifically to look for Tarzan, because Binns made it back and has apparently been trying to get someone to listen to him all this time. Jane, played by silent actress Enid Markey in a fairly unattractive Li'l Orphan Annie 'do, promptly gets lost and threatened by lions and all, giving Tarzan a chance to impress her with heroics. The expedition goes off to search for her. The villagers, having been preyed on by slave traders for years and seeing a group of heavily armed white men advancing on them, draw the obvious conclusion and attack first. Race war is prevented by Tarzan, who gleefully sets the village afire. The villagers run back to save their homes, the white men run in the other direction, and Jane runs into Tarzan's arms. What's that? Oh, don't whine about spoilers! Who the hell doesn't know how this story ends?

Tarzan of the Apes is worth seeing for many reasons, besides the tighter plot. There is some nifty footage of African wildlife, which must have been a lot trickier to get in 1918, even using stock footage. There are actual black persons, including Rex Ingram, playing Africans. And, if you're a Tarzan completist, it's mandatory viewing anyway. The best version is available on DVD from Alpha Video, but you can also catch it free on the Internet Archive.

Originally this film was shot back-to-back with its sequel, *The Romance of Tarzan*, which picks up the events of the second half of Burroughs's book. It fared badly at the box office, because it follows Tarzan's misadventures in civilization (although apparently, mercifully, leaving out the bit with Tarzan's driving up to a ranch in *Wisconsin,* in a *Model T),* and no copy has survived. Also lost is 1920's *The Revenge of Tarzan*, with the leaner Gene Pollar in the title role. But the Lord of the Apes would be back in front of the cameras many times before the advent of sound pictures, and next week we'll bungle in the jungle with more Silent Tarzan.

I better go get the school nurse! Oh...that's right, we're in the jungle...

STRONG & SILENT, DAY 2

(*The Son of Tarzan*)

SEPTEMBER 21, 2009

The Son of Tarzan, from 1920, is a pleasant surprise—even if it is a fifteen-part serial with the necessary cliffhanger ending every half hour or so, and endless artificial crises and padded-out scenes. There is a lot to mock in this film, coming as it did from a Poverty Row studio and being shot on the cheap. How cheap? Check out the Arab Sheikhs with painted-on beards and mustaches, wearing obvious bathrobes. At the same time, though, there is a lot to praise.

If you've read all the Edgar Rice Burroughs books, you'll be pleased to know that this is a pretty faithful adaptation of the novel on which it is based. If you've only ever seen the Weissmuller movies, you may be thinking that *Son of Tarzan* refers to Boy, the kid Tarzan and Jane found and adopted—because of course they never married in the Weissmuller continuum, and therefore (because it was the 1930s) Never Had Sex. Surprise! In the Burroughs books they *did* marry and produce a real

live baby of their own.

The baby grows up into fifteen-year-old Jack Clayton, aptly played by child actor Gordon Griffith. Dad Tarzan has settled down into a stolid existence as a British Lord—is that a toupee we glimpse him wearing?—and Mom Jane just wants to put the whole jungle experience as far behind her as possible. She has ordered young Jack's tutor to teach him nothing about the jungle whatsoever. What exactly she means by "Jungle" isn't specified. No geography lessons about Africa? Or no hints that there are places in the world where people don't always behave in a civilized manner? Tarzan (referred to throughout the film as "Lord Gray*stone*") grumbles that this isn't necessarily a good idea, but Jane wins out. Or thinks she does...

The truth is that young Jack has already figured out that it's a jungle out there, and he's eager to learn about it. He loves climbing trees, is fascinated by the great apes, and daydreams constantly about Africa. Some kind of Lamarckism is at work here, combined with a drastic case of ADD and hyperactivity. Meanwhile, bits of Tarzan's past are about to collide with his future...

In the previous Tarzan novel (and now-lost film), Tarzan battled a couple of villainous Russians, killing one and leaving the other as a prisoner of native villagers. The survivor, Paulovich, manages to escape at last, bringing with him one of Tarzan's old ape-friends. Akut the ape has been hanging around the beach, sadly hoping to glimpse Tarzan returning on a ship, so he goes willingly with the Russian when Paulovich flags down a passing steamer. Back in civilization, Paulovich and Akut go on the stage with a trained animal act.

But we're not finished with the exposition! We learn that a French Foreign Legion officer, M. Jacot, has made an enemy of Sheikh Amor Ben Khatour. When the Sheikh learns that Jacot has sent for his wife and baby daughter to join him in Africa, he ambushes the travelers, kills Jacot's wife, and carries off the little girl. Giving her the name Meriem, he raises her as his own, which means nonstop physical and verbal abuse. Meriem copes with it by living in a sort of fantasy world with her burlap dolly, clearly a predecessor of *9*.

Back to London, where young Jack sees a poster for Ajax (Akut's stage name) and decides to go catch his act. He sneaks out at night on

his own and goes to the theater, but Akut recognizes Jack's essential Tarzanness and goes ape onstage, climbing to the boxes to be with him. After the tumult dies down Jack is dragged home, and Paulovich demands restitution. Tarzan offers to buy the ape for a handsome sum on the condition that Paulovich ship Akut back to Africa. He writes out a fat check as half of the payment. Neither he nor Paulovich seems to have recognized each other at this point. The Russian pockets the check and is leaving when Jack accosts him. *Now* Paulovich realizes this kid is the son of his bitter enemy who marooned him in the jungle for years. He lures the boy back to his nasty little apartment, where he overpowers Jack, ties him up, half-strangles him, and prepares to throw his body down a trap door that opens onto a subterranean river. Jeez! The gritty horror is aided by the fact that actor Eugene Burr plays Paulovich as a pop-eyed psycho several shades creepier than Peter Lorre.

Fortunately faithful Akut breaks his chains and saves Jack, pitching Paulovich down the hole instead. Paulovich can swim, unfortunately, and is washed out to sea, where he is picked up by a crew of villainous Swedes. Jack frees himself and proves he's got what it takes to survive in the jungle, the naughty little minkey, by going through Paulovich's coat and taking his wallet. Seeing the cash and steamship ticket for Africa, he has a brilliant idea! And so he sets off for Africa, smuggling Akut along with him disguised as an old lady swathed in shawls.

Jack may be plucky and bright, but he's still a child; he's foolish enough to tell a fellow passenger that he's traveling alone with Granny and no one will be meeting them when they leave the ship, because they know nobody in Africa. The fellow passenger creeps into Jack's room at night, intent on robbing and killing him. Faithful Akut comes to the rescue again, killing the would-be murderer, but the tumult wakes the whole ship and Jack and Akut are forced to jump overboard, grabbing a flotation device on the way down.

Dawn of the next day, with Jack and Akut crawling ashore, and here is the great shining moment in the serial: Jack rises on his knees and sees before him the Africa of his dreams, mountains towering against the sunrise, the jungle below full of mystery and promise. It's the ultimate wish-come-true. This skinny little kid in his wet underwear

flings up his arms in triumph, and you have to cheer.

Jack wastes no time emulating his dad, mugging an African for his fur loincloth and spear and getting to know the local apes. He ventures close to the Sheikh's encampment, sees little Meriem being abused, and rescues her, although he is injured in the process. Little Meriem is impressed. Time Passes and they grow up together in the jungle, at first as brother and sister and later, it's implied, as lovers. The apes give Jack the name Korak, the killer.

From there on *Son of Tarzan* falls into the usual round of serials, in which the good guys are captured by the bad guys and then escape, and then get captured again and escape some more, and so on and so forth until Episode Fifteen, when all the plot threads pull together and resolve into a happy ending. Boy loses girl, girl loses boy, girl thinks boy is dead, girl is adopted by Tarzan and Jane and almost elopes with oily London cad. Paulovich causes no end of trouble with his bloodthirsty crew of Swedish Pirates. Sheikh Amor Ben Khatour is still hoping to recapture his adopted daughter so he can pull out some more of her hair or, better still, stamp her face with a branding iron. Young lovers are reunited and Tarzan saves the day. To give *Son of Tarzan* credit, though, there's some fairly clever plotting.

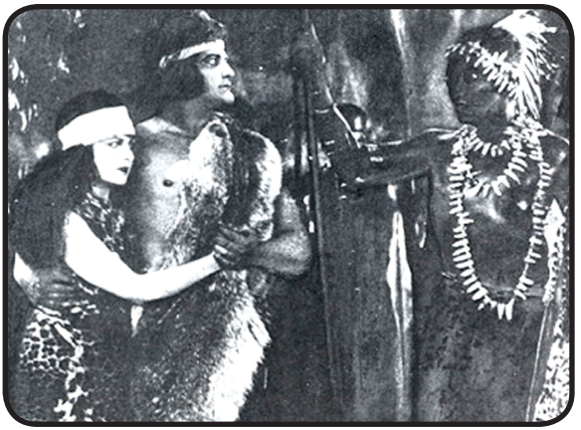
Too, the character of Meriem deserves some applause. She may be a bit shell-shocked from early abuse, but she grows into one enthusiastically feral girl. When Korak challenges and kills an ape who had been courting her, she whoops and dances savagely. This is no modest and fearful Jane. When she is assaulted by pirates, she fights fiercely. She's completely unselfconscious about bathing naked in jungle pools or occasionally popping out of her bodice. In the final scene, when Tantor the Elephant goes a little crazy, she risks her own life to lead him away from Korak. If there's a better pulp-era heroine than Meriem, I'd like to know who she is.

Son of Tarzan was plagued by troubles all through production. A big-name star (at the time, anyway) was announced to play Korak, but pulled out at the last moment. The studio's president insisted his wife star as Meriem, although he was finally overruled. After much publicity hoopla about real apes being contracted for and real tropical-island locations, the company ended up with moth-eaten-looking ape

costumes on extras and locations in San Bernardino and Pico Rivera, dismal suburbs of Los Angeles. The actor playing Tarzan broke several ribs in a fight scene. Shooting ran behind schedule. In the last installment the actor playing Korak was badly injured and unable to finish his last scene, for which an extra who kept his back to the camera was used. A rumor was started that the actor had died from his injuries, and it would appear that the film's distributors encouraged the false reports in hopes of extra publicity. Hawaiian-born Kamuela Searle lived on, however, tragically dying of cancer four years later. He was a good actor and a splendid Korak, lean and sinewy and athletic.

For years it was thought that nothing had survived of *Son of Tarzan* but a dreadful feature print edited down from the original 15 episodes, but apparently a decent copy survived somewhere and is available on DVD from Alpha Home Video. Bear in mind that it's a *15 part serial* and don't try to get through it in one night unless you put it in the DVD player at, say, 5:00 p.m. and are prepared to stay up late.

Next: more of Big Elmo Lincoln as he dons the leopard-skin skivvies for the last time in *The Adventures of Tarzan*!



Whaddya mean—"No shirt, no shoes, no service?"

STRONG & SILENT, DAY 3

(*The Adventures of Tarzan*)

SEPTEMBER 28, 2009

Next up on our list of Strong and Silent Survivors is 1921's *The Adventures of Tarzan*. Even so, what we have here is a fragmentary work. It was originally a 15-part serial and has come down to us as a neatly re-edited 10-parter. It opens with a replay of many of the events in 1918's *Tarzan of the Apes*, and most of the first chapter is spent bringing the audience up to speed, just in case there was still anyone out there who wasn't familiar with the Origins of Tarzan. Because this serial also features the return of Elmo Lincoln as a spectacularly beefy Ape Man, this makes for a nice sense of continuity. The plot is primarily derived from two of Edgar Rice Burroughs's novels, *The Return of Tarzan* and *Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar*.

Once the recap is completed, we are swung into the thick of the action without ever quite understanding how we got there. Tarzan and Jane have been marooned in Africa, which implies they must at some

point have left there, and Jane is taken prisoner by Arab slave traders (What? Again? But Arab slave traders were stock Burroughs villains). The supreme villains this time out, however, are Nikolas Rokoff and a dastardly Frenchman named Monsieur Gernot. Initially, they are joined by Tarzan's cousin, William Cecil Clayton, who has convinced Jane that Tarzan died during the shipwreck (they *really must* get a new travel agent), and is not only planning to usurp the title of Lord Greystoke but has gotten engaged to Jane as well.

The would-be Greystoke, however, isn't around very long; and that brings up the issue of the lions. There are more damned lions in this film than there were roaches in your first apartment. They run here; they run there, round and round the same set of trails in a jungle that looks suspiciously like the three-or-four-acre vacant lot you used to play in as a kid. At one point two characters are rolling around on the ground in a vicious battle to the death, and two lions run through frame, leap *over* the combatants and keep going. On another occasion, one of the villains is racing along a trail; a lion comes running from behind him and speeds past him, and the villain can only get off a pistol shot at its retreating flank. They serve as a convenient plot device when someone needs to be threatened or distracted, but for the most part they're just *there*.

Early in the film William Clayton, closely pursued by a lion, leaps over a log and vanishes on the other side, never to be seen again. His place in the Triad of Evil is soon supplied by Sheik Ben Ali, who, after kidnapping Jane, teams up with Rokoff and Gernot. Also wandering around in Africa is Professor Porter, Jane's father, who goes from a case of befuddlement to outright Jungle Madness, but he doesn't get anything much to do until the closing chapters of the serial.

To make matters more confusing, since we've seen him last, Tarzan has apparently become an agent of the French Secret Service and in this capacity is pursuing nasty blackmailer Rokoff, who has stolen from Tarzan the formula for a deadly gas. I can only think of one type of deadly gas Tarzan might be capable of producing, but why it should be necessary to write the formula down escapes me. Maybe it was explained in the missing chapters. Not only that, the baddies have learned of the existence of the lost Atlantean colony of Opar and are

determined to plunder it. So that he won't lose the map to Opar, Rokoff injects a little sadism into the plot by inscribing a copy of the map on Jane's bare back, using the tip of his knife. Fortunately, we aren't shown this. Jane is then rescued by Tarzan, who says soothing things and runs off to find jungle herbs to cure her wounds.

And here we see another repetitive and annoying plot point: all through the serial, Tarzan is forever leaving Jane on her own so he can go collect herbs, see what the baddies are doing, fight a lion, drop his leopard-skin toga off at the cleaners, and of course Jane gets recaptured *every single time.* Notice that leopard-skin toga, by the way; by 1921, the censors had decided that a furry breechclout was rather too brief as a costume, and so Tarzan wears a vaguely caveman over-the-shoulder number that obscures somewhat Elmo Lincoln's moobs and love handles. Other things to watch for: Louise Lorraine's sprightly little Jane gets several costume changes, fairly sensible ones when compared with Enid Markey's unvarying Olive Oyl fashion sense and Lil' Orphan Annie coiffure. And don't miss the shot of Og, the Bull Ape, who appears to be wearing Nikes in one scene in which he is perched on the back of Tantor the elephant.

In an early chapter, the baddies actually get to Opar, dragging along Jane as prisoner and closely trailed by Tarzan. It would appear the Atlantean colony has fallen on hard times. They live in what appears to be a hole in a sand pit; their males have all degenerated into spindly little Neanderthals who would make the Geico caveman grit his teeth in mortification; and they are ruled over by Queen La. La is a big broad in a tailored cowskin, who acts like a bossy hall monitor. Her shambling lackeys may not be the brightest bunch ever to stun a hippo with a club, but they do manage to capture the baddies and Jane. Instantly jealous of Jane's petite figure, La orders Jane sacrificed to the Flaming God. Tarzan to the rescue! La falls head over heels in love with Tarzan and doesn't know what to do, because she doesn't have a hankie to drop for him to pick up. She pines for Tarzan through the rest of the serial, but Tarzan is unswervingly faithful to Jane, even if he does forget where he put her sometimes.

For the rest of the serial, Jane (and the map scored on her back) goes back and forth like a football, captured by the bad guys, dragged

halfway to Opar, then rescued by Tarzan, and carried back to their little love nest in the wild. When it is discovered that her wounds have healed over and the map has disappeared, Rokoff and Company carry her off to the vaguely Arabic city of Sagarone, where a cackling old beggar named Hagar claims to be able to brew a lotion that will make Jane's scars reappear. Ouch. The old coot owns a booby-trapped house; just as Tarzan, having rescued Jane, is running down a staircase with her, Hagar pulls a lever that drops them into his hidden cellar. Inevitably they escape, emerging through a street-level window to find that Og the Bull Ape is thoughtfully holding the reins of a getaway horse for them. Maybe he just dropped in to Sagarone to shop for another pair of Nikes.

Naturally, Jane doesn't stay rescued for long.

There is some further business with the villains attempting to raid the ivory stores of the Waziri tribe; Tarzan joins the fight on the Waziris' side. Next, Queen La sends her caveman army to beg for Tarzan's leadership because Rokoff, Gernot, and their cronies are coming to steal her treasure. Back and forth, back and forth, and you don't need me to tell you that in the end the wicked are punished, Tarzan and Jane stroll away together down a romantic beach, and Queen La is left wailing, "You are not Morg! You are not Imorg!"

For a number of years, *The Adventures of Tarzan* was considered lost. Then, in 2004, a copy of the 10-chapter rerelease from 1928 was brought out by the Serial Squadron. If you can get past the fact that the remaining plot makes no sense, quite a good job has been done producing the 2-disc set and inserting explanatory title cards to fill out the plot holes resulting from the missing chapters. There are even extras, showing a number of scenes too fragmentary to be included in the restoration as well as a radio interview with Edgar Rice Burroughs.

If you're a fan of Elmo Lincoln, you'll want to see this, because this was his last outing as the Ape Man. Six years would elapse before any other versions of Tarzan were filmed, and by that point, Lincoln had become unhappy with being typecast and had moved on to other roles. Join us next week for a look at *Tarzan and the Golden Lion*, featuring a cameo by everyone's favorite monster grandpa, Boris Karloff.

You came in that thing? You're braver than I thought.

STRONG & SILENT, DAY 4

(*Tarzan and the Golden Lion*)

OCTOBER 5, 2009

1927's *Tarzan and the Golden Lion* ought to have been one of the more notable Ape Man epics. Loosely adapted from Edgar Rice Burroughs's novel of the same name, it had Burroughs's own enthusiastic support, largely because James Pierce, the actor cast as Tarzan, was hand-selected by Burroughs as most closely resembling his creation. Alas, *Golden Lion* failed to wow the critics, and we'll let Mr. Pierce himself explain why: "Because of poor direction, terrible story treatment, and putrid acting, the opus was a stinkeroo." His rancor was no doubt sharpened by the fact that, at Burroughs's request, Pierce dropped out of another film to play Tarzan. The film was *Wings* and Pierce's part was filled by a young unknown named Gary Cooper. Cooper's career went straight up, and Pierce never starred in another vehicle in his life. He did, however, marry Burroughs's daughter Joan. One hopes the alcohol did not flow freely at family dinners.

Pierce put it pretty succinctly, but there are so many levels of sheer *wrongness* in this flick that they deserve to be dragged screaming into the cold light of day, if only to serve as an example of how random dumbness can wreck a movie. Let's start with egregious mythos-revising: most of the action in the movie revolves around the kidnapping of *Tarzan's favorite sister*, "Betty Greystoke." Setting aside for a moment the sheer dumyankness of her name (it would be Betty Clayton), there is the riddle of her existence at all. One is forced to invent a missing scene in which Lady Greystoke gives birth to twins before she expires; and, fearful of their destinies should they grow up together, Lord Greystoke places the infant girl in a Moses basket that he then fastens atop the flat head of faithful Cheetah, who then dog-paddles all the way up the equatorial coast past Europe and, crawling ashore somewhere in the Thames estuary, delivers the baby to kindly Senator Organa.

Also, in no other early Tarzan film is colonialism's heavy hand so unpleasantly evident. In the opening scenes, we get to see the tribe of the Wazari joyfully celebrating the slaughter of a great bear. (Bear? Okay...) We have met the Wazari before as Tarzan's early adversaries and later allies. The camera dwells lovingly on their tribal dances, particularly one man who seems to be inventing the Funky Chicken, and then a couple of Tarzan's African houseboys come out on the verandah and ask where "the Chief" is. We learn that Tarzan has become the Chief of the Wazari: so much for their independent status. Later we see that icon of colonialism, a sleepy black servant, negligently operating a punkah fan with his foot as the white folks in dinner jackets sit around in the parlor.

But let's go back to that question, "Where is the Chief?" Why, he's playing in the jungle with his pet lion, Jab. We get to see Pierce's Tarzan in action and are rather less impressed than Burroughs was. Lean and muscular, to be sure, but the tightly marcelled hairdo and general resemblance to Harry Houdini are off-putting. Presumably the Ape Man is out enjoying a few stag moments before his sister's visit. Cut to Jane Clayton, Lady Greystoke, and sister Betty being carried in a gauzy litter by faithful Wazari at the head of a pack-caravan winding its way through the jungle toward Tarzan's plantation.

And, speaking of the jungle, who'd ever have thought that equatorial

Africa had so many oak trees, sycamores, and dry hills covered with sagebrush? The earlier films at least made a pretense of disguising their L.A.-suburb locations. *Tarzan and the Golden Lion* relies on one stock shot of some zebras running; the rest is nakedly Chatsworth.

While Tarzan sits fondly watching his buddy Jab tear the intestines out of a zebra, an ancient bearded man in rags staggers forth from the jungle and doesn't even manage to croak "It's—" before collapsing. Jab, sensing danger, jumps the threadbare unfortunate. Tarzan has to drive him off and rescues the stranger, who is an English explorer named Gordon.

Meanwhile, back on the trail, we meet the Bad Guys—and a stranger trio hadn't appeared on film since *The Unholy Three*. The lead Renegade White is Esteban Miranda, in Burroughs's original book a dead ringer for the Lord of the Jungle himself. Here, however, Esteban looks like about 300 pounds of Country Crock in a pith helmet. His second-in-command is a stubby little bearded creature with a memsahib's veil on *his* pith helmet. The third member is a Renegade Wazari, played in gloomy blackface by Boris Karloff. He lacks a bone through his nose but is otherwise all tricked out in tribal regalia, including what appears to be someone's attempt at a pirate captain's hat fashioned out of straw. I was looking forward to seeing some Karloffian overacting, but no such luck: Boris manages to hold on to one dour expression through the whole of the film.

With their army of the Unspecified Other Tribe, the villains trek around Africa looting and plundering anyone they can. Pausing beside a river, Esteban spots Lady Greystoke's rich baggage train settling down for the night on *their* side of the river. Woo-woo, look at the pretty ladies! He goes across the river to chat them up, first ordering his men to be ready to attack when he gives the signal. (That's right: *attack across a river*. Which has no bridge or convenient shallow bits.) The ladies indignantly rebuff his advances and the attack is on! It's a long drawn-out affair, as you might imagine, and only the timely arrival of Tarzan saves the day.

That night, at Chez Tarzan, Gordon the explorer explains that 10 years previously, he was captured by degenerate savages known as the Tangani. They carried him off to slave in the diamond mines under their

fabulous Temple of Diamonds. He has only just managed to escape, bringing a small bagful of sparkly souvenirs. But, darn it! Who should be listening at the window to hear this story but Esteban Miranda, who has led his evil army to camp nearby. Jab the lion eventually notices his bloated moon face peering through the window and gives the alarm, but Esteban manages to escape into the night. Tarzan resolves to lead an army out against the Renegades the very next day. He does so and, despite his legendary tracking skills, completely misses Esteban's crew.

They, meanwhile, take advantage of Tarzan's absence to attack the house. They capture Gordon, demanding that he lead them to the Temple of Diamonds. He refuses to do so. They then take Betty as hostage for his cooperation and off they go through the jungle, apparently pausing only long enough to kill one of Tarzan's favorite chimpanzees. Arguably the best performance in this film is turned in by the little chimp playing Gobu, brother of the murder victim. We get to watch an extraordinary display of primate rage and distress, culminating in a sort of primitive funeral and mourning session for the deceased. Gobu can scream his lament at Tarzan, but evidently in this film apes don't have the ability to communicate with the Lord of the Apes, unlike virtually every other creature of the jungle. On the right track at last, Tarzan leads the Wazari after the Renegades.

And here we are at the Temple of Diamonds where, we are told, the childish and superstitious Tangani have allowed themselves to be ruled by a few sly whites. They don't *look* sly, or exceptionally white. Who would have thought one film contained not one but two contenders for weirdest villainous trio ever? The High Priest, as portrayed by 8-foot-tall Chinese actor Yi-ching Lin towers over his two fellow priests, who are both tiny dumpy men who look as though they showed up too late for the auditions for Princess Jasmine's kindly old father. All three are dressed in glittery robes and wear headdresses that appear to have been stolen from Las Vegas showgirls. They worship the same Burning God as the degenerate inhabitants of Opar; no surprise, because in the original book, they *are* the Oparians. The Tanganis, ignorant and foolish as they are, get all freaked out over an earthquake and beg the High Priest to save them. The Priest assures them that a little human sacrifice will pacify the Flaming One. Can you guess who's going to fall

into his clutches?

That's right! Esteban and his crew arrive at the sheer face of the cliff that is the only way up into the City of Diamonds. They put ladders into place, but are hesitant to climb for fear of unknown dangers at the top. Say you're in Esteban's position. You have the choice of picking out some unimportant tribal red shirt from your ranks and sending him up the ladder, or you *might* send up your single hostage, who is, coincidentally, a dishy female you've been lusting after. Who would you choose to put in harm's way? Well, Esteban chooses Betty.

From here, *Tarzan and the Golden Lion* devolves into a lot of incoherent chases and rampages, and you may be tempted to throw the remote through the screen. But hang in there: there are at least two bits worth catching. One is the surreal extended moment when Betty, sitting on a rock at the top of the cliff, is completely unaware that Fat Little Priest #1 has poked his head out of a secret passage just behind her and is staring with doglike fixity at the back of her elbow. The other is when Esteban, in an attempt to impersonate Tarzan, crams himself into a teensy little leopard skin; I'll bet the actor went back and cried in his trailer for hours after he saw the rushes.

Long thought lost, *Tarzan and the Golden Lion* resurfaced a few years back in, rumor has it, an insane asylum in France. It's now available for your viewing pleasure, if I may term it so, from Alpha Home Entertainment. The print is decent and, fortunately, this is a mere feature film, not a multipart serial, so it clocks in at just under an hour. The accompanying music track is possibly the least inspired you will ever hear on a silent film.

Pierce, understandably bitter about dropping what turned out to be a choice role in *Wings*, nevertheless went on to star as the first-ever radio Tarzan in a weekly series opposite Joan Burroughs as Jane. Because his chiseled features were no longer out there for the world to see, one wonders whether his Indianan accent sat well with Tarzan's creator.

Next week, we'll look at the final silent Tarzan film, and examine another wrecked acting career. Same Ape Time, same Ape URL!

George hear twig snap...

STRONG & SILENT, DAY 5

(*Tarzan the Tiger*)
OCTOBER 12, 2009

"NEYAAAAAAHHH! NYAH! NYAH!"

That sound, my friends, is a man's acting career in its death throes. The culprit was *Tarzan the Tiger*, the year was 1929, and Frank Merrill was the unfortunate who happened to be playing the Lord of the Apes at the moment cinema sound technology was making its first experimental squeaks and gurgles.

Tarzan the Tiger is one of those late silent films marketed as a sound picture, something like the "Simulated Stereo" recordings of the early '60s: the film was shot in silence, but a recorded musical score with some sound effects at appropriate moments was supposed to create the illusion of a talkie. You hear coconut shells impersonating hoofbeats, primitive noisemakers impersonating lions and gorillas, and—oh, dear—Frank Merrill's actual human voice, in his best effort at the Victory Cry of the Bull Ape.

Nyaaaaahhhhhh.

Studio executives were unimpressed. A third Merrill film, to have been called *Tarzan the Terrible* (talk about handing the critics a club to beat you with!) was canceled. Frank Merrill joined the growing list of actors whose careers were ruined by the advent of the talkies. When 1932's *Tarzan the Ape Man* was being cast, no one called Merrill. It must have seemed bitterly unfair, because Merrill had worked long and hard to earn his leopard-skin panties. As early as 1921 he'd stunt-doubled for portly Elmo Lincoln in *The Adventures of Tarzan.* He was a gymnast with a magnificent physique, he had the aristocratic features suitable for Lord Greystoke, and he was the one who invented the business of Tarzan swinging from tree to tree on vines. His big break came in 1928 when Joe Bonomo had to drop out of *Tarzan the Mighty* due to injury, and Merrill was chosen to replace him.

Tarzan the Mighty is now lost, but was apparently enough of a success in its day to warrant a sequel, and Merrill apparently suitably heroic enough to be invited back for a second outing as the Ape Man. The scriptwriters turned once again to *Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar* for inspiration. The result is *Tarzan the Tiger.* It's another 15-part serial, and, although it is not entirely unwatchable, mostly it's...really dumb.

Setting aside that sad, sad little soundtrack, most of the drama revolves around Tarzan taking a blow to the head that gives him amnesia for most of the film. It also takes about half his IQ points with it; Tarzan supposedly reverts to his primitive, authentic nature, but the effect is more like George of the Jungle with a misogynistic streak. Tarzan not know Jane! Tarzan not understand this thing called Love! Tarzan need no mate! Hey, who stole Tarzan's bag of pretty pebbles he found in treasure chest in Opar? Tarzan really mad now! Tarzan gonna summon Tantor and chase bad people all over jungle!

Other problems: while Natalie Kingston was perhaps the most beautiful actress ever cast as Jane (in fact she and Merrill make a very attractive pair), the plot doesn't give her much to do except cringe when she's menaced, which is pretty much all the time. Lustful renegade explorers, gorillas, a whole host of Arabs of varying denominations, degenerate Oparians, Tarzan himself at one point—it's Jane as Victim the whole way. Not that one ought to expect a fearless feminist heroine

in this kind of serial, but, jeez, the scriptwriters might have been a little less repetitive with the menacing thing.

In fact, they might have been less repetitive altogether; the plot loops around itself in the same tracks several times. One Arab Chieftain after another plots with the main villain, Werper (and how's that for a name?), gets killed, and is replaced by an ever more lustful and dishonest Arab Chieftain. Jane faces the slave auction block not once but twice, and people run in circles looking for Opar, which seems to be either a fifteen-minute walk or a month-long journey away, depending on what the plot requires at that particular moment.

There is also a bizarre double standard as regards, ahem, decency. Jane is reduced to ever-skimpier costumes and even has a brief topless scene. There are scantily clad maidens in the slave market and in the Temple of Opar. Yet Tarzan has never been more covered up, in his matching leopard-skin ensemble of panties, caveman top, headband, and booties, with portable jungle-vine accessory. Having cast an actor with a dishy physique, *Tarzan the Tiger* does its best to hide his charms.

Worth watching: the exotic and mysterious Mademoiselle Kithnou as Queen La, a decided improvement over Lillian Worth in the same role. Very little is known about Kithnou; she was purportedly either an Anglo-Indian or a Euro-Indian, either from Pondicherry or Mauritius, first discovered as an exotic dancer in any case. Lean, lithe and steely-eyed, she is one ruthless bitch and would have been great as a recurring villainess. Sadly, *Tarzan the Tiger* was her last film as well.

What she found to do with herself afterward is a mystery, but Frank Merrill decided he wanted to work with children and spent the rest of his life as a recreational director and gymnastics instructor for various departments of the city of Los Angeles Parks & Rec. One hopes he bore patiently with the generations of kids who yodeled Weissmuller's Tarzan yell as they flung themselves from the monkey bars...

Alpha Home Video is your source in case you're a completist and wish to own this epic, but it's also watchable for free online at the Internet Archive. Your correspondent, however, has had enough of leopard skin. Yes, it's time to bid the Wazari a fond goodbye, pat Cheeta on the head, and hit the jungle trail. It's October! Shouldn't we be looking at some scary silents?

Am I feeling strange? Now, why would you ask that?

USHER FALLS, TWICE

(*The Fall of the House of Usher* and
La Chute de la Maison Usher)
OCTOBER 19, 2009

In honor of the season and as a tip of the hat to S. J. Chambers's ongoing articles about the first American master of horror and suspense, we're looking at a pair of silent films based on Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher.*

It was filmed twice in 1928, once by French avant-garde filmmaker Jean Epstein and once by American experimental filmmakers James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber. The American version is short, clocking in at just over 13 minutes, without any title cards to let you know what's going on. Unless you've read the original Poe story upon which it is based, you'll find it a bewildering series of dreamlike images. If you have read Poe's original, though, you'll find that Watson and Melville's film nicely pantomimes the essence of the story. Never read *The Fall of the House of Usher*? It's short and available online. Go read it now. I'll wait.

Back yet? Now go download Watson and Melville's film either from the Internet Archive or Google. See what I mean? Short and surreal but substantial, and really pretty far ahead of its time.

The French version is altogether more complicated. Watching it, especially in the present DVD release from All Day Entertainment, is a little like popping a piece of yellow candy into your mouth and discovering it's grape-flavored. Not bad, but not at all what you expected, especially if you were expecting something Corman-esque only with title cards.

Director Jean Epstein chose to make a feature-length film (well, 63 minutes) from *La Chute de la Maison Usher*, and in doing so he ran up against the problem any feature director has when adapting original material that's short: the story had to be padded out. He opted to do a sort of mash-up of *Usher* and another Poe tale, *The Oval Portrait*, with just a grain or two of *Ligeia.* Luis Buñuel, Epstein's assistant director, disapproved of this sort of thing and left the project. Considering the indignities wreaked on Poe's stories by later filmmakers (Universal Studios in the 1930s comes to mind), Epstein's *Usher* is really comparatively faithful to the spirit of Poe's work.

It opens with Allan, an old friend of Roderick Usher's, carrying his luggage across a dank and wretched autumn landscape. He has been summoned by a letter from Roderick, imploring a friendly visit because Roderick is depressed and his wife, Madeleine, has a mysterious illness. Come cheer us up! Allan does his best, but can't get any of the local villagers to give him a ride as far as the Ushers' place; they recoil as though he were proposing a trip to Castle Dracula. At last one local consents to drive him within sight of the house, situated in bogs, fogs, and more bogs, but Allan is obliged to squelch the rest of the way by himself. He is, at least, warmly greeted by Roderick, a neurasthenic given to fixed smiles. He meets the Ushers' single servant as well as the Doctor (who looks as though his face has been Botoxed into permanent immobility) and Roderick's sister—er, wife—Madeleine (who wanders around looking as though she'd like someone to get this leech off her neck, please...).

Now we learn that the men of the Usher family all have a hereditary kink: they are obsessed with painting portraits of their beloveds.

Roderick is no exception and keeps a palette and a fan of brushes with him at all times, forcing Madeleine to sit for long intervals even though she clearly feels the life force being sucked out of her. The more lifelike the portrait becomes, eventually to the point of visibly blinking, the more waxen and aged Madeleine looks. Roderick doesn't notice, of course, but Allan is no help either; he spends his time nearsightedly examining old books, and judging from the fact that he is shown with an ear trumpet in one scene, he's a bit deaf as well. Unlikely to hear any tormented screams echoing along midnight corridors, certainly.

Sure enough, Madeleine collapses and dies in the middle of a sitting, and Roderick and Allan only notice when they step on her corpse while backing up to admire the portrait. *Now* Roderick feels remorse, and carries on no end while the others in the household try to organize a funeral. And then the fun begins...

If you're a fan of the films of Jean Cocteau, you'll enjoy the surrealism and use of symbols in *Usher*, to say nothing of the dismal beauty of its images. The House itself is suitably vast and dark, dead leaves blowing along its corridors and ancient books spilling from its cupboards in heaps. Madeleine's trailing shroud becomes a character in its own right. As the men leave the Usher family crypt, the camera cuts repeatedly to a pair of frogs mating, the male clutching the female in a death grip. The actual Fall of the House at the end is a little disappointing, due to an unconvincing miniature and special effects, but realism doesn't matter all that much in a Poe film, does it? It's the mooood, which has that perfect Poe balance of creepy and dreamy. Madeleine is played by actress Marguerite Gance, wife of epic director Abel Gance, whose *Napoleon* was rediscovered in the 1980s, and indeed Gance himself has an uncredited role in *Usher.* Amusingly, the cinematographer is listed as Georges Lucas.

The available print features a background score of medieval music, which perfectly fits the mood but was unexpected. No extras whatsoever. Someone with a heavy French accent reads the title cards aloud. This, to judge from other Internet reviews, infuriated some viewers but didn't bother me particularly. You can view this on the Internet Archive for free, but be advised that it has also imposed Spanish subtitles below the title cards and stuck a "retro" logo up in

the left-hand corner of the screen. If you're as neurasthenic as Roderick Usher this will probably vex you to tears, but what do you want? It's *free.* Amazon formerly offered it for download rental or sale but has withdrawn it—oops—for licensing reasons. And Netflix offers the most watchable version, without the Spanish subs or irritating logo. Take your pick.

Next week, more scary silents. For now, three red roses and a snifter of brandy to the sad little man from Boston.

Boris! Hang in there, I'm calling a lawyer!

Waxworks

(Waxworks)

OCTOBER 26, 2009

This week we're looking at *Waxworks*, from 1924. We're back with the German Expressionists and look who's here! Conrad Veidt, Werner Krauss, Emil Jannings, and William Dieterle, to name but a few. *Waxworks* is an anthology film like *Der müde Tod*, three stories set within a framing device, and although less profound is spooky, playful, and fun to watch, especially if you've grown to appreciate the acting ranges of the principal players. If it misfires in the end, it's pretty plain it only did so because the filmmakers ran out of money. This is one of those occasions when a time machine would be useful: I'd love to go back, write out a check for however many marks they needed, and see what the director, Paul Leni, might have done with it.

Leni, better known for his later films *The Cat and the Canary* and *The Man Who Laughs*, opens *Waxworks* with superimposed footage of a fairground, similar to the opening of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. We're

in a different dimension here, however: Instead of the lumpily whirling carousel and tilted reality of the former film, we see real Ferris wheels, real carousels, real merrymakers. A young man ("The Poet," played by William Dieterle) sees a HELP WANTED notice outside a traveling wax museum. A writer is wanted to produce copy advertising the museum's displays. Being, like all writers, broke, he grabs the notice and hurries in to offer his services.

He meets the elderly proprietor and the elderly proprietor's flirtatious daughter, Eva. The two young people are immediately attracted to each other. He is also shown the museum's four exhibits: wax figures of the legendary Haroun al-Rashid, Caliph of Bagdad; Ivan the Terrible; Rinaldo Rinaldini (who never actually gets a sequence in the film because of the aforementioned cash-flow problem, but in case you're interested he was a bandit in an eighteenth-century German novel); and Jack the Ripper, or so the sign on his exhibit reads, but in the title cards he is repeatedly referred to as "Spring-heel'd Jack." The scriptwriter seems to have conflated the serial murderer from 1888 with the cryptocreature from 1838.

The museum's proprietor explains that he needs stories written for each of the statues. The Poet, noticing that the old man is carrying around a severed arm, asks about it and is told that Haroun al-Rashid's arm just fell off and hasn't been repaired yet. Grabbing inspiration where he can, the Poet sits down at once and, with a giggling Eva reading over his shoulder, proceeds to write a little tale in the style of the Arabian Nights. And...cue the German Expressionist sets! *Now* we're back in the tilted streets and melting architecture of the Expressionist Dimension.

It serves the fantasy Bagdad of the film particularly well, too. Rather than elaborate block-long sets such as the ones built for *The Thief of Bagdad*, a couple of matte paintings and a few interiors and exteriors suffice. I was particularly struck by a shot of domes rising one behind the other like so many crescent-topped bubbles. Less being absolutely more.

We meet Haroun al-Rashid, the puckish little Caliph who likes to wander in disguise through his realm at night, helping his poorer subjects. He is so cuddly-tubby and adorable you just want to hug

him, even when you realize he's played by Emil Jannings, whose Mephistopheles makes such a blood-curdling entrance in Murnau's *Faust.* We meet also a young baker and his wife, passionately in love and, of course, dead ringers for the Poet and Eva. The baker's smoky oven annoys the Caliph, who sends out his Vizier to behead the baker. Evidently he doesn't really mean it, because all the Vizier does when he gets there is sample some baklava and flirt through the window with the baker's wife. He hastens back to tell the Caliph that there's a real hottie living just around the corner, and the Caliph decides to check her out when he goes on the prowl (more like a waddle actually) that night.

Meanwhile, being leered at by a real Vizier has gone to the baker's wife's head and she starts whining about how she never gets to go out, never gets anything nice to wear, et cetera. In desperation, the baker swears that he will go steal the Caliph's own Magic Wishing Ring for her, and storms out. Enter Haroun al-Rashid, who proceeds to pitch some sedate grandfatherly woo, to which the coy beauty responds with delight. It's a farce with chases, slapstick, a fake severed arm, and, that eternal source of mirth, a fat man trying to find a place to hide from a jealous husband.

But boy, oh, boy, does *Waxworks* change its tone for the next sequence.

Here's Ivan the Terrible, psycho Czar of All the Russias, and he likes to go sneaking out at night, too—but not to assist the struggling poor, no siree. He goes down into his dungeons to watch the screaming agonies of subjects he has condemned to death. His favorite poisoner has a neat little trick of handing the Czar an hourglass timed exactly to each prisoner's final moments. The Czar clutches it to himself like a sex toy, writhing in orgiastic pleasure as he watches the condemned expire. Disturrrrbing.

And really, really scary, because Ivan is played by Conrad Veidt, better remembered as the Somnambulist Cesare in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.* But all that was passive in Cesare—the glittering blank stare, the twitching, the flared nostrils—is active in Ivan, who is hypersensitive to every word spoken around him as only a paranoiac sadist can be. And, wouldn't you know it, Ivan's minister silkily suggests that *even his favorite poisoner* may be plotting against him. Overhearing this, the poisoner knows he's doomed. For whatever reason (job insurance?) he

goes to his cache of hourglasses and paints Ivan's name on one of them...

Next, the Dumbest Boyar in the World has arrived at Ivan's palace to remind him of his promise to attend the boyar's daughter's wedding. Ivan is immediately suspicious—and he has a point, because what kind of twit would invite an all-powerful homicidal looney to his daughter's special day? "You're just trying to lure me from the Kremlin!" screams Ivan, glaring with those unblinking eyes, and the boyar abases himself and protests that honest, it's only a wedding invite!

Ivan announces he will go, but only if they trade garments first. The boyar has no choice but to obey. Ivan climbs into the driver's seat of the horse-drawn sledge and the boyar, wearing Ivan's robe and crown, takes the passenger's seat. They go dashing through the snow, and, by sheerest happenstance, armed assassins *are* waiting by the side of the road. Ivan pulls up in front of the reception hall with the poor boyar stone dead in the back seat, shot through with an arrow. The Czar grandly reclaims his crown and robe—what's a few bloodstains?—and declares that this supposed to be a happy occasion! Everyone must drink! Musicians, play! Let's see some dancing! The dismayed wedding guests snivel and cower, but they have no choice but to obey, with this staring monster seated at the head of the table.

The heartbroken bride (Eva, again) sneaks back outside to have a good cry over Daddy's corpse, which has just been sort of dumped on the front steps. She is promptly arrested and carried off to the royal love nest (shudder) by Ivan's henchmen. When the groom (the Poet, again), realizes this, he most unwisely accuses the Czar and is dragged off to the dungeons himself. Things get worse before they get better, believe me.

Next up is the tale of Jack the Spring-heel'd Ripper, the shortest sequence; I suspect the creditors had already begun to pound on Leni's door at this point. It doesn't really work, which is a shame, because Jack is played by Werner Krauss, better known as the magnificently slimy Dr. Caligari. He walks through a few effects shots, but we never really get even a good close-up, and it's impossible to say what he might have done with the role if he'd been given his proper screen time. Too, he's costumed in a homburg hat and jaunty scarf, which is...unexpected, for Jack the Ripper *or* the Spring-heel'd one. A dream

sequence with the young lovers is so thoroughly telegraphed by camera effects and *Caligari*-esque dark labyrinthine streets that the scene loses any suspense. And then, abruptly, the film is over.

Still, I didn't feel cheated—laffs, horror, high concept, what's not to love? If you'd like to watch *Waxworks*, too, you're in luck; ever-reliable Kino has compiled the nicest print possible in a restoration from two extant copies. Extras are limited to a clip from *The Thief of Bagdad* showing scenes that were clearly influenced by Leni's Haroun al-Rashid sequence. Thrown in as lagniappe is one of Leni's experimental films, an odd little animated crossword puzzle with film footage, clues. One suspects it was the sort of thing theater owners ran for restless audiences waiting for the lights to go down, like those Film Facts quizzes sponsored by Coke. It's far more engaging, however.

Why, yes—this IS a new look for me!

PHANTOM OF THE OPERA

(The Phantom of the Opera)
NOVEMBER 2, 2009

Everyone knows this story. Or thinks so...

You may have first encountered the Phantom in one of his modern incarnations, which have become increasingly swoony and romantic. Claude Rains's battered old musician sported a mask to hide the acid-burned side of a normal face; the mask shrank even further for Andrew Lloyd Webber's Phantom, to enable him to sing all those passionate pleas to Christine Daae. By the time the musical was filmed in 2004, there seemed barely any reason for Gerard Butler's buff Phantom to wear a mask at all. All of which undermines the logic of the story, because when your facial booboos could be fixed by a couple of trips to a good dermatologist, why bother with the whole hiding-in-the-cellars and pretending-to-be-a-ghost bit?

No, for the story to make any sense, for it to have any real depth or bitterness, we need to go back to the 1925 silent version of *The Phantom*

of the Opera, with Lon Chaney Sr. in the title role. It isn't the first; that would be a German film from 1916, now lost, but this is the version closest to the original 1910 novel by Gaston Leroux, which is written in such a matter-of-fact way that its fantastic elements seem plausible. Erik the Phantom is no romantic hero here; he's a psychopath with a hideous face, and no woman in her right mind would find herself torn between Erik and her handsome fiancé. All other versions imply that there's a dreamboat behind the mask, if a slightly kinky one. Only Chaney's Erik genuinely terrifies.

Phantom sets the mood in its opening sequence, presented without explanation: a man with a lantern is wandering fearfully in darkness. We see a shadow move across a doorway. *Something is down there with him.*

And then, pop, we're up in the sunlight in front of the Paris Opera House and watch as the final arrangements are made transferring the property to its new managers. After the deal is closed, the former managers mention slyly that there *have* been a few stories of a ghost in the Opera House. The new managers have a hearty laugh at that. Meanwhile, the new season is kicking off with a performance of Gounod's *Faust.* The choice of opera is significant, for reasons I'll go into below. Up in the boxes reserved for the wealthy are the Comte de Chagny and his younger brother Raoul, there to watch Raoul's sweetheart Christine. Christine has been a humble chorine before now, but in the last few months has suddenly developed a good enough voice to advance to understudy for the company's prima donna, Mme. Carlotta. Evidently this is the night Christine has finally gotten her big chance.

We first see Christine as *Faust* is ending, and here it might be helpful to know that Gounod's libretto is not really about Faust but about the girl he seduces and ruins, Marguerite. As the opera ends, Marguerite is about to be executed for killing her illegitimate child by Faust in a fit of insanity. Mephistopheles tells Faust he can rescue her, but Marguerite refuses to go with them; she rejects the world, the flesh and the devil and dies. In the very last scene she rises into Heaven, as a chorus of angels sing of her salvation. In our first glimpse of Christine/Marguerite she is holding the hand of a guardian angel, smiling as they are hauled into Stage Heaven on flying harnesses. Christine has a thing

about angels, as we discover.

Raoul comes to her dressing room after the performance to congratulate her—sort of: "How nice that you finally achieved your little goal and sang before a real audience! Now you can give all this up and marry *me*." Christine, however, informs him that her singing career is the most important thing in her life and that Raoul had better forget their love affair. Raoul departs, chagrined, but not before he hears Christine having a conversation with someone else in her dressing room.

The someone else is Christine's Angel, the Spirit of Music, who has been speaking to her for some months now from behind the walls, giving her voice lessons. Christine *really believes* he's an angelic spirit sent to shape her talent into something tremendous. The Spirit congratulates her on her triumph, but warns her that to be truly great she must focus on her art and give up all worldly distractions. Christine is perfectly happy to do this, but then the Spirit goes on to say that soon he will take tangible shape and claim her love. O-kay.

Meanwhile the new managers are discovering that there is indeed an opera ghost, and he does have mysterious powers. The little girls of the ballet scare themselves silly when they glimpse his shadow, and together with a comic stagehand go running like a pack of frenzied kittens down into the gloomy cellars under the Opera House. Working there among the stored props and backdrops is Joseph Bouquet, who takes time out from repairing a grisly prop severed head to tell them about all the times *he's* sighted the opera ghost. Spooky! And who's that mysterious man in a cape and fez? Why is he lurking here and there with knowing glances?

Back in the managers' office, Mme. Carlotta comes storming in with a note she has received threatening a curse if she does not step aside and let her understudy, Christine, sing the role of Marguerite again. The warning's ignored, Carlotta sings, the famous chandelier falls, and next time it's Christine singing Marguerite, in the scene in which she's being tempted from her virtuous life by Faust's gift of jewels. Big applause for the plucky heroine, who retires to her dressing room to be informed by her Spirit that the time has come for them to get to know each other better. He instructs her to walk into her

mirror—she obeys, as the mirror opens onto a hidden passageway. The mirror closes behind her, and when Raoul bursts into the room a moment later he finds no one.

In the musical, this is all a dark and dreamy scene with the Phantom taking Christine across a subterranean lake by boat, but in the film Christine's dismay and disappointment are evident from the moment she comes face to face with him. It's clear that she was expecting something radiantly spiritual, not a man in a creepy mask in a dark corridor. It is implied by a blurring of the image and her slumped posture that the Phantom mesmerizes her into following him down below, first by horseback and then by boat, to his lair in the depths of the Opera House's cellars.

Now Christine's really creeped out. The place looks like a funeral home, thanks to Erik's morbid taste, and the kicker comes when the Phantom says, essentially, "How nice that we finally achieved our little goal and triumphed on the stage! Now you can give all this up and live down here forever with *me.*" Great: she's traded a pushy Vicomte for a stalker in a mask. The discovery that the Phantom sleeps in a goddam COFFIN pushes her over the edge and she faints, to awaken hours later in the obsessively arranged bedroom Erik had prepared for her. Realizing that he's been planning her abduction for some time, Christine is beside herself with horror. She finds a note from Erik telling her that she has nothing to fear as long as she does not attempt to see what's under his mask.

Out in the parlor, the Phantom is playing solo on his organ (and my, what a metaphor for a stalker's sex life). Christine advances on him with intent to pull off the mask. Oh, yeah, Woman's fatal curiosity is proverbial, et cetera, but what would you do in her position? About the only thing she has at this moment is the power to find out who her captor really is. And so she sneaks up behind the Phantom and pulls off the mask.

Sheer and utter horror.

Audiences in 1925 were said to have fainted and screamed at this moment, and it's hard not to feel a jolt now, even after years of exposure to *Famous Monsters of Filmland* covers and Revell monster models. You just aren't prepared for it. Chaney's artistry with appliance makeup

was already legendary, but the Phantom remains his masterpiece. The fact that Chaney can actually express a wide range of emotions—shock, rage, spite, heartbreak, confusion—with that face is all the more remarkable considering it must have been exquisitely painful to wear. (For example, reports that he used only a piece of fish skin and glue to pull the tip of his nose back seem to have been untrue; apparently he also used a tiny pair of hooks, one in either nostril, fixed to a transparent line and wire. He had frequent nosebleeds on the set.)

If you haven't seen the silent *Phantom*, I won't spoil the end for you, because it differs substantially from the musical and other cinematic treatments. Do watch this classic, but be warned—finding which version to watch takes some hunting around.

To begin with, multiple versions were shot, scrapped, reshot, and edited. What finally hit the screens in 1925 was a collage, the best bits compiled into one coherent narrative. It was a box-office success, ran its appointed time, and then was shelved in the vaults. But, with the advent of the talkies in 1929, Universal decided to remake *Phantom* as a sound picture. There were problems with this, however. For one thing, Chaney was now under contract to MGM and unavailable. A compromise was reached by reediting the original film extensively. Chaney's dialogue remained silent, retaining title cards. Some scenes were dropped, some scenes reshot for sound, and in some cases roles changed; Virginia Pearson, who played the wonderfully temperamental Mme. Carlotta in the 1925 version, either could not sing or was otherwise engaged, and so singer Mary Fabian was recast in the role. Unwilling to lose Pearson's performance, however, the film editors simply changed the title cards and made her Mme. Carlotta's mother, confronting the managers on her daughter's behalf.

At the same time, a silent version of the new *Phantom* was prepared for those theaters still without sound equipment. This, paradoxically, seems to be the only surviving copy of the 1929 revision, because the sound copy is now lost. The 1925 film only exists in a primitive Blackhawk version, without its Technicolor sequence. And Universal let *Phantom* lapse into public domain in 1953, a move they must have keenly regretted later, so dozens of cheap copies have been released by DVD companies operating out of garages. What, then, do you watch?

The Phantom of the Opera can be screened for free at the Internet Archive, although I don't recommend the experience, because it has a ghastly blurred copy with the Technicolor Masked Ball scene faded to almost sepia. Image Entertainment released an "Ultimate Edition" in 2003, containing both the 1925 and "restored" 1929 versions, but unfortunately sloppy transfer has resulted in motion blurs and other artifacts that some viewers feel renders them unwatchable. My recommendation? Go for the Image 1997 release, the one with the soundtrack composed by Gabriel Thibodeaux and fortunately the version Netflix offers. It's crisp, it's clean, it's a joy to watch, and the two-strip Technicolor sequence is bright and fresh-looking.

More spooky stuff to come. I know, I know, Halloween was last week, but this is still the dark season of the year, so we've got a few chills and thrills to share before hanging up the Christmas stockings. Meanwhile, endless iterations of the Phantom's story are told, and will continue to be told as long as romantic little girls dream of strange angels who, sadly, turn out to be creeps living in basements.

I'm bored...let's do something evil.

HAUNTED CASTLE

(Haunted Castle (Schloss Vogeloed))

NOVEMBER 9, 2009

It is occasionally nice to be reminded that even geniuses have their off days.

You've seen F. W. Murnau's 1922 horror classic *Nosferatu*, right? Hopefully in the restored edition from Kino? A brilliant creepfest from its opening frames. You would think, wouldn't you, that his *Haunted Castle* (aka *Schloss Vogeloed*) from just a year earlier would be full of signs of budding talent? Especially with the great Fritz Arno Wagner (*Nosferatu*, *Der müde Tod*, the *Dr. Mabuse* films) as cinematographer?

Not so much, actually. In fact, hardly at all. In fact...*Haunted Castle* will have you shaking your head at the bitter irony that this film survived the ravages of time while *Der Januskopf*, Murnau's celebrated Jekyll-and-Hyde knockoff, is lost.

The German title makes fewer claims on our expectations of horror to come. *Schloss Vogeloed* simply references Lord von Vogelschrey,

who is throwing a hunting party at his country estate. You see the oak-paneled rooms full of men playing cards, smoking, drinking, and doing other all-male social stuff. The only woman in residence is Lady von Vogelschrey, but we learn that another is expected: the Baroness Safferstätt, arriving with her husband, the Baron. This is the point when you realize that you're watching a filmed play, and a pretty primitive one at that, and you check the DVD box to be sure you have the right movie. You do. Sigh.

In walks the plot complication, duly announced by the butler: Count Oetsch, looking nasty and sardonic. Lord von Vogelschrey and his guests are appalled. "You forgot to invite me?" snarks the Count. No, he was intentionally left off the guest list; a Retired Local Judge, one of the card players, quickly fills us in on the scandal. A few years earlier, Count Oetsch's younger brother was murdered, and the Count himself was the chief suspect. He was never convicted, but everyone knows he's guilty. To make matters worse, the Baroness Safferstätt is his brother's widow, since remarried. Lord von Vogelschrey pleads with his unwanted visitor, asking him to leave and spare the lady's feelings, but Count Oetsch refuses. He just sits there like a big malignant spider, smoking nonchalantly while everyone tiptoes around him with disapproving looks.

Lady von Vogelschrey, who is a weepily emotional sort, is beside herself with humiliation. What an affront this will be to the Baroness! Surely she'll refuse to stay! But then she remembers something and produces a letter, waving it about excitedly. The letter is from Father Faramund from Rome! Father Faramund from Rome? Yes, Father Faramund from Rome! (The English title cards were clearly written by someone more comfortable with German grammar and idiom. You know: "I will kill the wabbit with my spear and magic helmet!" "Your spear and magic helmet?" "Yes, my spear and magic helmet!")

It turns out that Father Faramund (from Rome) is a great theologian and a distant relative of the Oetschs. He is coming especially to see Baroness Safferstätt, and the Baroness has let it be known she urgently wants to see him, too. Surely she'll stay at the party now, even with her former brother-in-law lurking about! Lady von Vogelschrey can dry her tears. You can, too, because next we get a great shot of horses

galloping along, pulling the Safferstätts' carriage through a foreboding landscape, overexposed and stylized. Yes, you *are* watching a Murnau film after all. The scene looks as though it was spliced in from *Nosferatu*. Sadly, it's gone in a flash and we're back to the drawing-room drama at the Castle, with its amateurish exterior model surrounded by shaky miniature trees.

Of course the Baron and Baroness snub Count Oetsch, and the Baroness does indeed announce that she's leaving at once, but is promptly dissuaded by Lady von Vogelschrey's letter from Father Faramund. Lady von Vogelschrey is frantically affectionate, hugging and kissing the Baroness so passionately through the film that I'm sure male viewers got their hopes up for a sapphic interlude. It never happens. I think the point was to contrast Lady von Vogelschrey—warm, good mother, dutiful hausfrau—with the Baroness, who is a chilly creature. As played by actress Olga Chekhova, she is always staring coldly into the middle distance or, if the scene requires an extreme reaction, closing her eyes. Woman as Frozen Monolith. Ms. Chekhova seems to have gone on to an illustrious career as an actress, but you wouldn't suspect it here.

Meanwhile Count Oetsch is still lounging around in the drawing room, making cryptic remarks. He claims to have learned to predict the future from a mystic in India, and when asked how many shots will be fired during the hunt, answers only one shot—two, tops. He adds that other men may hunt in fair weather, but he himself will only hunt during storms. The guests tire of this pretty fast and go off to ride to the hunt, but rain begins falling and they return immediately. Count Oetsch, true to his word, grabs his gun and departs into the storm. And then Father Faramund arrives! From Rome. By coach. Late at night. He's a big man in monks' robes and tonsure, with a beard that would do credit to a ZZ Top member, and heavy-rimmed glasses. He declines to wake his hosts, saying he will present himself in the morning, but asks to be taken directly to Baroness Safferstätt.

The Baroness receives him and proceeds to tell him the story of her marriage to the younger Count Oetsch. A flashback ensues. At first the couple were blissfully happy, but gradually her hubbykins grew distracted, bookish, more interested in spiritual pursuits. In particular

he fell under the influence of Father Faramund himself, who wrote (from Rome) to advise him that true happiness can only be found by renouncing worldly things. Like sex, presumably, because Wifey then found herself drawn to dark and perverse longings and started that expressionless-staring-into-the-distance routine.

Here the Baroness breaks off her tale, announcing that she's fatigued and will tell Father Faramund the rest in the morning. Father Faramund retires. Morning comes and, lo! He doesn't answer the servant's knock! In fact, he's vanished from his room! He's nowhere to be found! Everyone's certain he's been murdered and, of course, the suspicion falls on Count Oetsch, who is still being pointedly sinister. Accusations and counter-accusations fly! There is a pointless sequence involving a kitchen boy who gets slapped for eating icing out of a pastry bag! And then night—dark and stormy, of course—falls again, and no one feels safe.

Cue the only other sequence that will remind you you're watching a Murnau film. A guest known as the Anxious Man falls asleep and opens his eyes to see his bedroom window flying open. As the drapes blow wildly, a deathly hand reaches through and comes closer...*closer*... and just as It grabs him and pulls him out into the night, the guest wakes from his nightmare, safe in bed. All very atmospheric, but the scene's force is immediately dissipated by another dream sequence, in which the kitchen boy finds himself being fed all the sugar icing he can eat by Father Faramund, who looks on benignly as the boy turns to slap his boss between every mouthful. Maybe it was intended as comic relief. It's just creepy.

Dawn comes at last and the film finally gets down to resolving whodunnit. I had it figured out well ahead of the last five minutes, but then I've read a lot of Agatha Christie novels.

Reasons to see this film: It's Murnau's earliest surviving work, and, if you're a Murnau fan, it will interest you. Ditto if you're a student of Fritz Arno Wagner's work or an admirer of Olga Chekhova, who in addition to acting had a successful career as a double agent during WWII; her life makes interesting reading. Or maybe you *like* stiffly performed drawing-room dramas. Or are a connoisseur of cheesy exterior-model shots. Or perhaps you personally will find it a profound

work of cinematic poetry, as one reviewer did, going on at some length about the brilliance of a shot of a couple of coffinlike doorways and the visual metaphor counterpointing the stifled intensity of the underlying...yadayadayada.

To be fair, the print I watched is dark, blurred, and muddy, and, as I pointed out, the title cards are painfully Germanic in their sentence structure. I saw it on an Alpha Home Video cheapie twofer disc, but Kino has released a restoration that is reportedly in much better condition. Perhaps it made the title cards a bit more coherent for English speakers, too. Kino's extras include a look at some of the set designs and some excerpts from the mystery novel on which *Haunted Castle* was based. The novel, by the way, appeared serially in a magazine; the film version, shot in 16 days, timed its release for the week the final chapter appeared. I'm sure the media event helped.

Next week, a look at what purports to be the earliest werewolf movie ever made! Ah, but is it?

Fix the health care system? Why?

WOLF BLOOD

(Wolf Blood)

NOVEMBER 24, 2009

After Universal Studios failed to copyright its 1925 *Phantom of the Opera*, it realized that the horror films were cinematic gold and swiftly proceeded to capitalize on *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *The Wolf Man*, and other denizens of the Laemmle ranch. Those images were merchandised as model kits, Halloween costumes, and lunch boxes. And, of course, as perpetual remakes.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the trend was to reference the stories' literary sources: *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.* There was an *Arthur Conan Doyle's Mummy*, but it was a bit of a weasel job—rather than the immortal Karloff classic we all know and love, it merely referred to a Conan Doyle short story about *a* mummy that happened to reside in a university dorm room. When *The Mummy* was eventually remade, it was full of so much special-effects flash and period costuming that most people didn't notice or mind how little it

resembled the original film. Appropriately enough, there is no *Ur*-text for *The Mummy*.

No real effort was made to do a full-out werewolf remake. Curt Siodmak, who wrote the screenplay for 1941's *The Wolf Man*, supposedly based it on one of his own short stories, after all. It bore little resemblance to 1939's *Werewolf of London*, and even less to the granddaddy of all werewolf films: 1929's *Wolf Blood.*

If you don't recognize *Wolf Blood* as a horror classic, that's because it isn't exactly horror. It's science fiction, based on bad—albeit cutting edge for the time—science. It has a love triangle, a Horatio Alger–esque hero, and stunning outdoor photography of the Canadian wilderness: there was a strange American fad at this time for stories set among lumberjacks and lumber camps. In Canada. Go figure.

The film features actor/director George Chesebro as Dick Bannister (and isn't *that* a two-fisted, Boys' Own Stories name?). Dick is the handsome young manager of Ford's Lumber camp; he communicates with his boss long distance by letter, but the boss has been lagging in correspondence lately. Stalwart Dick struggles on, shipping off felled trees, building a field hospital for the lumberjacks constantly being shot by the enemy Consolidated Lumber camp across the river, and thwarting the schemes of the villainous half-breed bootlegger, Jacques LeBeq, whose best customer is Ford's own night watchman.

There is a reason why Boss Ford has been remiss in answering letters: he's dead. The company is now being managed *in absentia* by his Jazz Baby daughter, Edith—a Charleston-till-you-drop girl for whom life is a long joke. This being the Roaring Twenties, Edith's parties are what America felt led to certain moral decay—tuxedoed boys distracting the butler in order to empty their pocket flasks of bathtub gin into the punch bowl. I wonder what they would have made of *Reefer Madness*?

Edith is a happy party girl. Life is one gay, mad whirl, she tells her fiancé. The fiancé is Dr. Eugene Horton, and he looks like one, what with his weedy moustache, permanent bad hair day, and being much older than Edith. If you think he and Edith are not going to last long as a couple, you are very observant.

The Charleston comes to a stop when Dick's latest plaintive letter

arrives. Edith reads it and is moved: perhaps life is not a joke after all. And, Say! This would be a great opportunity for Eugene to build a hospital of his own—even though he has made it plain that he is a trust funder and would rather do research than practice medicine.

Edith decides to go check out Daddy's lumber camp, and Dick is thunderstruck when he meets her. I thought I was writing to some crusty old bird, he says, and instead it's a right purty gal! Golly gee, Miss Ford, you really have It! Edith dimples appreciatively; she can't take her eyes off Dick, either. Sure, he wears too much white pancake and Harold Lloyd black eyeliner, but he's just *heaps* dreamier than Eugene.

The two of them circle around one another, making goo-goo eyes. Edith is entranced. Maybe it's the cute forest animals Dick shows her on wagon rides through the woods. Maybe it's the purty wildflowers he sends her anonymously via Pop Hadley, the drunken night watchman. Poor Eugene watches wretchedly, but he knows no hanky-panky is going on: Edith is a girl on the up and up.

At this point, I was tapping my feet and wondering when the werewolves were going to arrive.

One day, Dick is riding out alone, doing manly things, and he discovers that the bad boys of Consolidated Lumber are building a dam across the river. The river is the only outlet for shipping out Ford's lumber to market. Dag nab it! exclaims Dick—another gentleman's agreement broken! Those durned Consolidated guys! When he confronts the Consolidated boss, Jules Devereux, the blackguard sets his bullies on valiant Dick and beat him to a pulp. Dick then proceeds to wander around the forest for hours, *bleeding from an open artery,* before being found by Dr. Eugene.

Eugene, having noticed that open artery (he *is* a trained physician), determines that the only thing that can save Dick's life is a blood transfusion. Unfortunately, the only nearby dwelling is the sordid cabin residence of Jacques Lebeq, the bootlegger who already has ample reason to hate Dick. When pressed to donate blood, he cruelly declines, and says that if Dick needs blood, he can have some from Lebeq's pet she-wolf out back.

Let's glance over why Lebeq keeps a she-wolf in the first place (just

how small *is* the dating pool in the Canadian Rockies?).

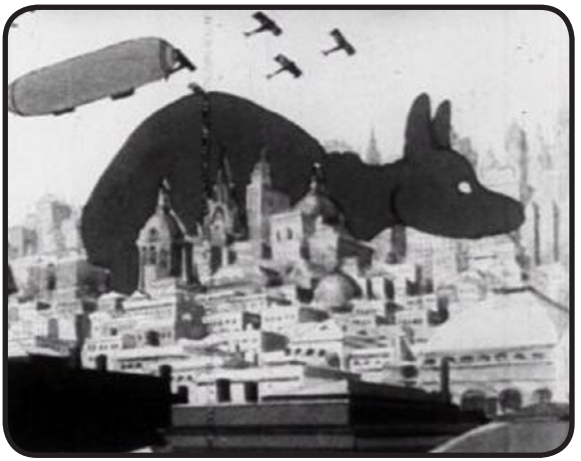
One would think Dr. Eugene would indignantly refuse this bizarre offer and maybe donate some blood himself. But maybe the researcher in him triumphs over his Hippocratic oath (or maybe he's just really tired of all those woodsy wagon rides and anonymous posies). For whatever reason, he pumps poor Dick full of—you guessed it—*wolf blood!*

And it works! Apparently the Van Helsing principle prevents apoptosis. Dick recovers. He staggers around weakly, attempting to carry on with the job, but news travels fast in a logging camp. Lumberjacks are a superstitious lot, it appears, and they don't rightly know as how they take working for a man who's been contaminated with *wolf blood*. Suddenly Dick is getting the cold shoulder. No one will let him play in any lumberjack games.

At this point, Jules Devereux is abruptly ambushed by wolves and torn to bits. Coincidence? The men of the lumber camps think not. Dick, who has been battling bouts of delirium and high fever (and small wonder), doesn't know whether he's responsible for Devereux's murder or not. Only Edith believes Dick is innocent, until Dr. Eugene does some out and out lying about the transfer of wolfish personality traits through the transfusion of blood. Meanwhile, hordes of spectral wolves lead Dick through the forests on a nightmare journey. Well? Is he a werewolf or not?

You'll have to watch *Wolf Blood* to find out, but suffice to say this is not really a film to watch if you're into dark and stormy nights. To my knowledge, the only place you can view *Wolf Blood* is as the second feature on the Alpha Videos release of *Haunted Castle*, reviewed here last week.

Next week: well, the pumpkins have all collapsed into themselves and over the ruffling of turkey feathers can be heard the faint insistent chime of those damned sleigh bells. Time to move on to something a bit more seasonal, yes?



Stitch? Stitch? Sorry, you have me confused with someone else.

THE PET

(The Pet)

DECEMBER 1, 2009

By 1921, Winsor McCay had learned enough about self-promotion to bill himself, and justly, as "the inventor of animated drawing." Sadly, he shortly lost interest in making any further films, working on other projects until his death in 1936. We're lucky that he completed his animated *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend* series first with *The Pet*, a disturbing little science-fictional romp.

The Pet opens, naturally, with a couple retiring to bed. The husband remarks that he ate a delicious rarebit at his club that evening; the wife chides him, because everyone knows that eating the rich cheese dish before bedtime brings on nightmares. Hubby says he can't help it; he loves rarebits so! And his doom is fixed...

A little animal creeps up the walk in the couple's garden. Despite calling out MEOW in block capitals, it doesn't look much like a kitten. Is it a puppy? A bear cub? Who cares? It's cuuuuute, coos Mrs. Rarebit

Fiend, scooping it up and taking it into the house.

The lady of the house bathes her new pet and ties a big bow around its neck, sending it out in the garden to frolic until Mr. Rarebit Fiend comes home from work. He isn't exactly thrilled to see the little creature, complaining that his wife is "bugs" about pets. Bugs she may or may not be, but she's clearly not psychic, or she'd be able to peek sixty-three years into the future at *Gremlins* and realize that one should never, ever feed strange animals, no matter how adorable they might be. Kitty-Puppy-Cubby-whatever-it-is is given a nice saucer of cream and promptly grows, almost doubling in size.

This only mildly surprises Mrs. Rarebit Fiend, who tucks her new pet into a little crib of its very own and tells it to be good and go to sleep. After bouncing off the crib rails a few times, the pet jumps out and wanders into the Rarebit Fiends' bedroom. There it spends a lengthy time exploring under the covers before settling down between Mr. and Mrs. Fiend, causing Mr. Fiend to jump up in disgust and go out to sleep on the sofa.

(Notice, by the way, how McCay's background paintings have evolved from the simple running lines in *Gertie the Dinosaurus*. There's a photorealistic quality that won't show up again until the classic Fleischer cartoons.)

The pet rises early and begins to prowl through the house, experimentally tasting everything it encounters. With each mouthful it continues to grow in size, until—trotting out to the kitchen, where Mrs. Fiend is setting the table for breakfast—it eats the family cat and follows it with the breakfast, the breakfast dishes, and even the electric coffeepot, sucking down the appliance cord like a particularly rubbery strand of spaghetti. And, of course, it keeps growing. Mrs. Rarebit Fiend is distressed. Mr. Rarebit Fiend goes off to the nearest chemist for something to kill the pet. He returns with a barrel of something called "Rough on Rats" only to find the pet is now the size of a horse. And no wonder! It has eaten most of the furniture in the house, the family parrot, almost all the coal in the cellar, and a complete hosepipe complete with plumbing. Happily it wolfs down the entire barrelful of poison.

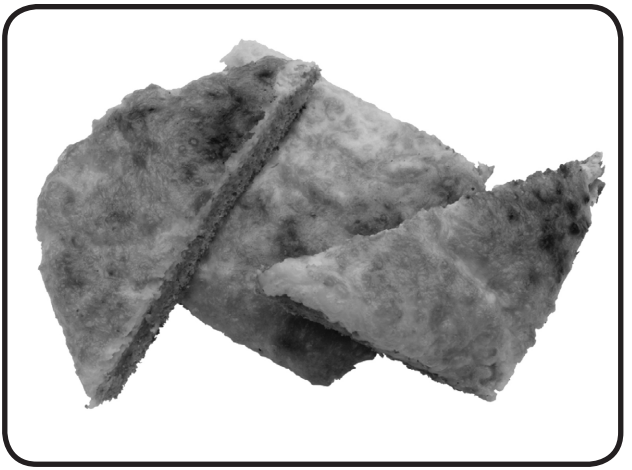
Creepy! The pet changes color, it trembles violently, and then its

skin erupts in bubblelike blisters, covering it completely. But does it die? No. The blisters recede and the damn thing grows *again.* Now the size of an elephant, it bites its way through the garden wall and emerges into a quailing world.

Mr. Rarebit Fiend hastens to the nearest police station to raise the alarm. Not a moment too soon, either, because the pet now, in a *first for science-fictional giant monsters,* is roaming the city eating streetcars and whole buildings. Four years before dinosaurs invade London from the Lost World! Twelve years before King Kong rampages through Manhattan! Twenty-three years before Tex Avery thinks up a gag concerning a giant canary! And you have to wonder whether a young Robert Anson Heinlein didn't catch *The Pet* at his local picture palace, storing some of its images away for *The Star Beast* a generation later.

In other words, it's an understatement to call *The Pet* a seminal work, especially in its catastrophic final scenes. The death-diving biplanes, the suddenly-not-cute-at-all feral thing with glowing eyes rearing against the skyline...is it an analogy expressing suppressed fears of parenthood? A parable about overconsumption? Or just a warning against eating so damn much rarebit?

Where can you view *The Pet*? On YouTube, although you'll be obliged to hunt around a little. Both Image Entertainment and Sling Shot have put out nice Winsor McCay anthology DVDs containing a print of *The Pet*, and, although they are no longer being manufactured, copies seem to be still available. Pop one in your DVD player and then just melt some cheese, add dry mustard, ale, and minced onion, serve over a bit of toast, and sit down in front of the screen... Any nightmares you may have are guaranteed to be absolutely in the spirit of Winsor McCay.



Psychoactive cheese!

THE FLYING HOUSE

(The Flying House)

DECEMBER 8, 2009

Well! Just when I thought the last of the relevant goodies had rolled out of the Winsor McCay Xmas stocking, I found a little gem stuck way down in the toe. *The Flying House*, from 1921, is one of the *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend* series and was actually drawn by McCay's son Robert. Its theme is both SFnal and timely, what with Pixar's *UP* coming out on DVD, so let's have a look.

Flying House opens with a couple retiring to bed. They had a delicious Welsh rarebit for dinner, but the wife is worried: will she have nightmares? The husband gruffly tells her that rarebit never gives *him* bad dreams. Both nod off. A moment later, however, the wife wakes with a start, alone in bed. Where has her husband got to? And what are those strange noises coming from upstairs?

Climbing the stairs, she discovers her husband working on an immense engine he has installed in the house. In response to her

questions, he simply tells her to go back down and read the letter on the dresser. The letter turns out to be from the man holding the mortgage on the house, informing the couple that he's about to foreclose. The husband, refusing to be evicted, has transformed the house into a vast flying machine. As the wife watches, he attaches a propeller and starts up the engine. The house tears loose and lurches into the air, trailing a pair of pergola roofs as wings, and they're off!

Slowly they rise over the roof of a train station and soar above the city. A band of Prohibitionists, agitating for water instead of whiskey, get deluged when the house knocks a water tank off the roof of a skyscraper. The house soars over rivers and even dives into a lake and back out again. It lights briefly on a smokestack for repairs, sending a dense cloud of coal smoke down the blocked chimney and gassing the bewildered stoker. When the house collides with a glass conservatory it neatly shears away the central dome. Heedless of the havoc he is causing, the husband chews his cigar and explains that he means to beat the mortgage-interest payments by flying around until he can set down in a new location where the mortgage holder will never find them.

But then, they encounter a storm! The house is whirled around like a toy in black clouds and lightning, and finally blown clear into outer space. Here the animators pause for a bit of self-congratulation with a title card reading, in McCay's usual impeccable Stunt Roman font: *To Teachers and Students—Special attention is called to the remarkable piece of animation which follows. The Earth and Moon revolving on their orbits in the firmament, drawn true to astronomical calculations, with the beautiful constellation of Orion in the background*—discreetly signed "The Management." Although what follows isn't exactly Chesley Bonestell, it's still kind of sweet to see how the animators believed in the cultural significance of their art form.

Of course, all that dignity flies out the window in the next scene, when the couple land on the moon and contemplate living there, only to be chased back into space by a giant with a giant fly swatter.

And things just go from bad to worse, because now not only are they millions of miles from Earth and lost in space, they have run out of gas. And, to make matters even more desperate, back down on Earth

a professorial gent is showing off his moon-rocket gun to an audience of silk-hatted colleagues, proudly declaring that it will fire a rocket traveling ten thousand miles a second. It will take only six seconds to reach the Moon and explode! Which means it'll miss the Moon by more than a hundred and forty thousand miles, of course, but Uh oh...

The Flying House nods backward to Méliès and forward to *UP* and says something to the present-day homeowner struggling to stay housed. Pretty good for a little sixteen-minute short! It can be viewed online on Google Video, although you may have some trouble finding it—for some reason, the uninspired and monotonous "Bug Vaudeville" shows up more often than most of McCay's other work—or you can rent John Canemaker's excellent DVD collection *Animation Legend: Winsor McCay.*

Next week—Santa's Jolly Boots of Doom are inexorably trampling closer to our hearths and homes. What about a silent *A Christmas Carol*?

Scroooooge....

SILENT CAROLS

(Scrooge; or Marley's ghost and *A Christmas Carol)*

DECEMBER 14, 2009

There will be spoilers, to begin with. That must be perfectly understood, because I don't want to hear any whining from someone who grew up in a cave without benefit of books, TV, or radio, thereby missing any of the countless versions of this holiday classic trotted out every year. Come on! You all know how this story goes. From Roger Zemekis's latest slapstick outing with dead-eyed CGI characters back to the animated offerings by Richard Williams and Mr. Magoo, from Alistair Sim to George C. Scott to Patrick Stewart, everyone's had a go at adapting Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol.*

In fact, *A Christmas Carol* is one of the earliest surviving books ever filmed. The illustration above is from the 1901 version, of which a little more than five minutes still exists. Titled *Scrooge; or Marley's Ghost*, it was produced with much hoopla by British film pioneer R. W. Paul. How much hoopla? It got a Royal Command viewing by King Edward

VII the following December. Considering its age, the one existing print is in pretty good condition, which leads one to wonder whether the missing footage was lost rather than simply allowed to deteriorate. We see Scrooge in his office as Bob Cratchit shows someone out; Scrooge sends Cratchit home, goes home himself, and sees (in what must have been cutting-edge trick photography) Marley's face appear briefly in place of his door knocker.

Visibly nervous, Scrooge puts on his dressing gown and nightcap and draws the curtains. He settles down to eat his gruel and, after a mouthful or two, falls asleep at the table. Cue the entrance of Marley's Ghost, rather disappointingly draped in a sheet, who sketches in a pair of improvised vignettes projected against the curtain backdrop: Boy Meets Girl, Boy Loses Girl. Scrooge expresses belated grief. Whoosh! We're off to Christmas Present, which is essentially watching first the Cratchits and then Scrooge's nephew Fred drinking toasts to the holiday. From there we go straight to the graveyard with Scrooge's tombstone—much lamentation from Scrooge—and there's just a glimpse of Tiny Tim shuffling off his tiny mortal coil as the film runs out.

Dramatically weak as this version is—no Three Spirits? Scrooge's tombstone revealed *early?* WTF?—it would appear to have been based largely on a popular stage adaptation of the time. I can't imagine what the dramatist was thinking, unless he was trying to save money on costumes, and name me one local stock company that can't come up with a white nightgown, an XXXL green bathrobe and a black cloak with a hood, for crying out loud.

All in all, *A Christmas Carol* was filmed six times during the silent era. Some of the versions have been lost, but Edison's interesting version from 1911 survives, notable also in that it features Charles Ogle (the first film actor to portray the Frankenstein Monster on film) as Bob Cratchit! This fifteen-minute adaptation opens with Bob Cratchit letting Scrooge into his offices, but in after Scrooge crowds a trio of charitable gentlemen, shaking fake snow from their hats like so much Parmesan cheese. After Scrooge sternly tells them where to get off, they depart, but in comes Scrooge's nephew Fred to wish him the joys of the season. Unfortunately he has brought some giddy friends with

him, and they hippety-hop all over the office before getting the boot. You'd think Fred might have warned them that the old man wasn't exactly crazy about Christmas frolics.

Pausing only to threaten some carolers with a stick, Scrooge grudgingly sends Cratchit off and we next see Scrooge at his front door, regarding Marley's face (a rather disappointing magic-lantern slide effect) projected over a turtle-shaped door knocker. The scene in which Marley's Ghost actually confronts Scrooge is pretty neat, though, with a real attempt to echo the original illustration and some lively acting. Cut directly to the Spirit of Christmas, appearing out of thin air. Yes, that was *Spirit*, singular; we only get one spectrally embodied holiday in Edison's script. His costume is sort of a mix between those of the Spirits of Christmas Past and Future, but mostly he looks like the Burger King.

Well, okay. Scene where young Scrooge's little sister comes to bring him home from school, check. Scene at Fezziwig's ballroom, check, and what do you know? They really *are* dancing Sir Roger de Coverly. Points to somebody at Edison for research. Scene in which Scrooge breaks up with Belle, check. Now we move to Christmas Present, with "visions of what the miser's wealth could do." Here comes the Spirit of Christmas with a big parade horn full of glitter, showing Scrooge the Christmas dinner the Cratchit family *could* be having if Scrooge wasn't such a skinflint. And here's Scrooge's nephew Fred, asking for his sweetheart's hand in marriage and being refused because he hasn't a fortune of his own. Scrooge could fix him up, though, couldn't he? Scrooge is so moved he tries to slip him some spare change then and there, which of course doesn't work because of the exchange rate between this world and the Spirit world. Finally we get the two grasping specters of Want and Misery (not Want and Ignorance, as in the book, which is odd; unless Edison made the change because it was understood, even then, that the average person in the audience is *proud* of being ignorant).

Scrooge has a moment of solitary reflection on changing his ways before the Spirit of Christmas returns, looking absolutely ridiculous with a thing like a bride's veil draped over his head, to show Scrooge solemn and awful visions of the future. And they're pretty awful, all

right: here's Scrooge's future self gasping out his last, attended by a hatchet-faced laundress who yanks off his signet ring and looks as though she'll be back for his bed curtains and blankets before he's quite cold. And here's the money shot, the big moment for the crash of chords, as Scrooge's tombstone appears! Scrooge, horrified, collapses on the bed and faints.

Next, it's Christmas Morning, and even though it's pitch black outside Scrooge's bedroom window, it's broad daylight where carolers sing in the streets below. Scrooge goes merrily about his way rectifying wrongs, donating cash to charity, making Fred his business partner with a guaranteed comfortable income, and scaring the Dickens out of the Cratchits by delivering a big holiday hamper in person.

Even with the alterations, this is a pretty respectable *Christmas Carol.* But, really, Dickens's original is such a straightforward masterpiece of storytelling that it withstands all kinds of cinematic redaction and revision, unlike, say, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (the movie), in which Seuss's story is completely inverted and Whoville is full of grabby people who have forgotten what Christmas is all about. But whether Scrooge is portrayed as a man, a woman, an American, a Depression-era businessman, or a TV executive, the main message of *A Christmas Carol* survives.

You can see both these silent versions for free on Google Video, nice little Christmas trinkets for a cinematic stocking. Next week: more Silent Nights!

I don't know, Muriel, he told me he was Santa Claus and I could trust him with my wallet.

A CHRISTMAS PAST

(A Christmas Past–collection*)*

DECEMBER 21, 2009

Happy Holidays! In this Christmas stocking you'll get an assortment of silent films topical and timely, thanks to the careful stewardship of Kino International and Paul Killiam.

A Christmas Past gives us a fascinating look at early American observations of Christmas in the 20th century. It's amazing to see how much of the standard mythology for Santa Claus was already in place; it's also interesting to observe that it was already a cheerily secular holiday, despite current claims that holiday inclusiveness is a recent invention of the devil.

The first piece up in this collection dates from 1901. *A Holiday Pageant At Home*, filmed 108 years ago while Queen Victoria still sat on the throne, presents a mother and her children sewing, reading, and chatting in their middle-class home. In comes the father of the family, apparently announcing he wants a pageant prepared for Christmas.

In the next scene, the two youngest girls stiffly make some sort of recitation with synchronized gestures; the older girl, in particular, looks as though she'd rather be anywhere else than in front of the camera. Next scene, the prologue is past, and our play consists of an older brother and sister dressed in adult clothes, relentlessly scolding the youngest girl, who weeps theatrically. But she is avenged! In comes the youngest boy, dressed as either a bandit or a pirate, brandishing a Bowie knife and a pistol. He chases the unpleasant pair until they fall to their knees and beg for mercy, at which the littlest girl cheers and claps. Father kisses Mother for a pageant well directed and that's all, folks! This is interesting for its look back at the Victorian Christmas custom of amateur theatricals at home, and also for the relative novelty of the camera. Most of the principals stare frankly at the cameraman. It's much more like a home movie than a studio production.

Next up is *A Winter Straw Ride*, from 1906. Two sleigh-loads of young ladies go riding through the snow in a small town somewhere in upper New York State. They whoop, they cavort, they fall off the sleighs, and they chase a number of unfortunate young men across the snowy fields. Having knocked them down, they proceed to scrub snow into the men's faces and clothing. That's it for plot. These rather alarming hoydens tend to dress like members of the Oyl family—big boots, heavy long skirts, and heavy rolled turtleneck sweaters. One is reminded forcibly that this is the generation that fought for (and *won)* the right to vote.

With *A Trap for Santa* from 1909, we get into tragic violins territory, and no wonder: it's directed by D. W. Griffith. In the style of his title cards: Family Desperate—No Work for Father—Father Drinks To Forget His Troubles. Feckless Father Leaves Note Telling Family They Will Be Better Off Without Him (sure they will)—Mother Tries To Work But Is Turned Away From Employment Agency. But Surprise! Obscure Aunt's Estate Settled On Mother Just In Time. Mother and Kids Now In Palatial Home—Kids No Longer Look Like Woebegone Edward Gorey Drawings—Mother Still Moping For Missing Husband. Mom Tells Kids Santa Will Come In At The Window—Kids Decide To Set Trap for Santa Under Window—Father, All Unbeknownst, Attempts To Burgle House He Doesn't Know Is His Wife's—Wife

Catches Him Before Something Tragic Happens—Inexplicably Takes Him Back—He Ends Up Playing Santa Claus For His Kiddies. Happy ending all around, I guess. If you like your acting with plenty of backs of clenched hands to foreheads or thrust up to God in attitudes of hysterical prayer, this is your style of drama.

And here's *A Christmas Accident* from 1912, altogether more palatable. The Giltons and the Biltons live next door to one another in the same duplex. Mr. Gilton is a Scrooge-like old meanie. The Biltons are a large, cheerful family without much money. All year long, the Biltons annoy the Dickens out of Mr. Gilton by being loud and happy. On Christmas Eve, Mr. Gilton goes out to buy his Christmas turkey; the Biltons, meanwhile, have blown all their money on presents for their children and are doing without a turkey this year. But wait! Old Man Gilton gets lost in a snow storm and wanders into the wrong half of the duplex. The Biltons welcome him warmly, and he learns the true meaning of Christmas. Actually nicer than it sounds. Note in particular how small turkeys were 100 years ago.

Next up: 1914's *The Adventure of the Wrong Santa Claus*, one of a popular series about Octavius, an unlikely combination of Bertie Wooster and Sherlock Holmes (and no, it wasn't directed by Guy Ritchie). In this particular installment, Octavius is invited to play Santa at a children's Christmas Party, and complications ensue when a burglar enters the house in his own Santa costume. He gets away with the goods but Octavius comes to the rescue! Kind of entertaining, actually.

All the previous plotlines are sort of cannibalized for 1915's *Santa Claus Versus Cupid*. Two guys are in love with the same girl—one is a good guy, one is a bad guy. Both dress up to play Santa at her Christmas party. Meanwhile, poor Binks Mulligan, the coachman, is impoverished with a sick wife and no money to buy food for his children. He's tempted to commit burglary at the house where the dueling Santas are competing. Will he be stopped in time? Will he be redeemed? Will there be a happy ending? If you've watched the other films this far, you know the answer to that one.

And now for something completely different—1925's *Santa Claus*. This is a surprising little two-reeler with a poetic script and genuine

footage of Alaska shot especially for the film. Two actually rather creepy-looking children decide to stay up and meet Santa so they can ask him what he does during the rest of the year. Santa is happy to oblige and tells them all about his palace in the Arctic snows. We get a lot of establishing shots of real walruses and polar bears as well as depictions of vast reindeer herds. And what does Santa do when he's not bringing toys to good little children? Breaking and domesticating all those reindeer, of course! That's right, there are scenes of actual reindeer wrangling. He also visits his friends the Eskimos and learns what their kids want for Christmas each year (you'd think abundant blubber, but it turns out they want dolls and gumdrops just like everyone else). Furthermore, he oversees the city populated by elves within his vast frozen fortress; it has its own fire station and police watchtower. He inspects the ongoing work on toys, particularly a model fairground. (Please note: there is a brief shot here of some black minstrel dolls dancing, in top hats and tail coats. If this disturbs you, look away.)

But more than anything else, Santa spends his time spying on children through his huge telescope, which can evidently see over the curvature of the Earth. You wouldn't want to be naughty little Billy Smith, who gets struck off Santa's gift list for robbing a blind man. Apparently it's okay to be Bobby Harrison, though, who apprehends Billy with obvious murderous rage and nearly shakes his head off his shoulders. Bobby Harrison gets rewarded with a live pony and a cart. I would have added a book on anger management, but Santa didn't ask me. And it's not a good idea to be precocious Clara Roberts, who at 7 years of age has a complete makeup kit and an advanced sense of superiority; Santa gives *her* a washcloth and soap. Boy Scouts, on the other hand, get rewarded for their sterling qualities with all sorts of manly camping gear. Santa also hangs out with the Easter Bunny, sharing his data about naughty vs. nice, and passes time with Jack Frost, who here looks sort of like the kid from *Where the Wild Things Are*.

A quick glass of reindeer milk and Santa is on his annual rounds, starting with Nome, Alaska. Some effort is made to explain why some kids never get Christmas presents: either people neglect their

chimneys or Santa runs into a nasty little elf called Hard Times. All in all, *Santa Claus* does a pretty thorough job of outlining Santa's private life. I imagine children in 1925 found it satisfyingly informative and a visual treat as well.

Following is *A Christmas Carol* from 1910, reviewed here last week. I have nothing to add except that Charles Ogle, who played Bob Cratchit (and earlier Frankenstein's Monster and who may thus be dubbed the first horror star) had big doomed-looking eyes like Peter Lorre.

Last of all we go back to 1905 for *The Night Before Christmas*, with Santa pitching straw to feed yet another herd of reindeer. We see him briefly, working in his toy shop, and from there it's mostly vignettes of an Edwardian family enjoying the anticipation of Christmas Eve. Santa puts in an appearance via a nifty little cyclorama of reindeer bobbing across a wintry landscape; he leaves bunches of toys, and ends up mouthing, "Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!" from the silent screen.

And that's the roll of Lifesavers in the toe of the Christmas stocking, kids. Season's Greetings to you all and have a safe and sane holiday, however you choose to spend it!

About the Author

Kage Baker was a prolific science fiction and fantasy novelist and short-story author. She is best known for her critically-acclaimed Company series of historically-based time-travel novels (*In the Garden of Iden*, *The Anvil of the World*). She won the Theodore Sturgeon Award for her novella *The Empress of Mars* and the Nebula Award for her recent steampunk novella, *The Women of Nell Gwynne's*, which was also nominated for the Hugo and World Fantasy awards. She was a regular blogger at *Tor.com*, at which the essays in this book were originally posted.

Quite aside from all that, Kage Baker made killer Gingerbread Zombies. Her first name (glad you asked) is a combination of Kate and Genevieve—her two grandmothers—and is pronounced like the word "cage." Many of her formative years included watching old Boris Karloff movies on various late-night creature-feature programs, and when she was eight, she fractured her left shoulder while swinging from a tree and pretending to be Tarzan's daughter.

Kage worked extensively in theater before becoming a professional writer, and at one point she taught Elizabethan English as a second language. She enjoyed the Silly Season, that magical time of the year around mid-to-late summer when UFO, Bigfoot, and Elvis sightings inexplicably peak.

Kage lived in Pismo Beach, California, with her very own jungle denizen, a lilac-crowned Amazon parrot. She died from cancer on

January 31, 2010, at the age of fifty-seven, far too soon. She told her sister Kathleen: "I want you to tell all these people that I wanted more time to spend with them. Tell them I meant to, tell them I wanted to hear what they said and tell them what was on my mind."

KATHLEEN BARTHOLOMEW is another daughter of Hollywood. She used to play between the paws of the Sphinx outside Paramount's Lemongrove Gate. She grew up exploring the Hollywood Hills and every library she could find, accumulating an enormous fund of peculiar (and occasionally useful) knowledge.

Since age fourteen, she has accompanied her sister Kage Baker on an endless journey through the environs of California, several ages of English history, Mars, and some associated alternate universes. She is still mostly living there, although she has technically relocated from Pismo Beach to her native Los Angeles, with Harry the Parrot. They now share a home with yet another sister, Kimberly, and her family, including two cats and a singing Corgi.

Kathleen is continuing Kage's work, dealing with the reams of notes and years of ideas Kage left her. She also writes a daily Kage-centric blog at http://kbco.wordpress.com.

This book is dedicated to Neassa,
who accompanied Kage and me through so much of it