

Restoring Films

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Cinema is an amazing world, where no boundaries exist. Sadly 70% of films shot before 1950 in this world, have completely disappeared. The safety film of today is 35 mm wide. The chemical structure of films before 1950 was nitrate, which allowed the film stock, to steadily reduce in width. Films in nitrate tend to jam, glue, cramp and cringe, and disappear and decompose. Nitrate films burn easily, while safety films do not. The heat of a cigarette can put fire on a Nitrate film. Film archives all over the globe are restoring and preserving rare films. Recently the French Embassy, the Alliance Francaise, and Cinema- theque Francaise, Paris presented Serge Bromberg, a film historian and a cinema conservator, with a collection of rare, silent films and some films with a sound track. In the olden days, there was an off stage, live musical accompaniment to silent films. In the projection on the lawns of St Paul's Cathedral, Kolkata, Bromberg played the piano, with a lively off-screen voice introduction and explanation as part of cine-musical theatre.

"Gwalior" (2 mins, 1908, France) documents a village street, a man on a bull, and horse drawn carts. Midway the film melts. The town area has two-storey houses, pedestrians and bullock carts. A man on horseback appears. The objectives keep suttlng. Bromberg's music is improvised. Groups of rural women sell earthen pots and cane baskets by the roadside. A man on an elephant ascends the broad stairs to Gwalior fort, perched on a hill. Beyond the first gate to the fort, one notices statues and murals on inner walls. The towers and minarets of the town become visible from the fort ramparts.

Emile Cohl's "Fantasmagories" (3 mins, 1908, France) is an early animation cartoon film. Tricks, special effects, flow sketches and designs portray a man and a woman lifting objects. The articles disappear, the sticks are extended, and bottles absorb objects. A girl arrives on horseback.

Thirteen years after invention of film, colour in cinema came into existence. Film prints were made from black and white stock. They were then printed, giving the impresion of colour. The Chinese-Italian Co-production, "Fartale-butterflies dance" (6mins, 1907, colour) presents dancers with white sheets. Many dancers create the magic of dance, while dancing the butterfly dance, before a pagoda arc in Japan. One man and several girls are in kimono costume. A girl plays a harp, and another girl is in a setting of large windows. Soon coloured umbrellas appear, and the girl within the panels, flits around in ballet dress. The objective of moving dancers glide by in the fixed frame. The room spaces have inner baroque wood designs. Girls in coloured kimonos jump and swing. The man and a woman reappear in a clock, while girls in white sheets costumes, dance in mirth.

Charley Bowers acts and provides special effects in "Now you tell one" (25 mins, 1926, USA), where there is a quest for truth at the 'Liars Club'. Before a large gold medallion, with an effigy of George Washington, incredible tales are recounted. Forty seven elephants trumpet and enter a palatial building, during a farewell dinner. Brocoli swims on the back of a cyclist around the shores of Dover

and claims to have crossed the Channel. The re-telling of weird stories over dinner continues. A man disappears under a hat, and later drives out intruders. Brocoli saves a man, who has his head inside a cannon and also attempts to light the fuse. Fruit trees grow from machines and tool boxes. Shoe laces germinate plants. There are wild shrubs penetrating the body of a man. A rat shoots a pistol at a brood of cats. When Brocoli expresses love to a beautiful girl, the old husband drives him out of the garden, with a broomstick. The sapling fantasy concludes with the award for 'King of Liars.'

"Big Broadcast" (5 mins, sound, 1938, USA, colour) by George Pal, a Hungarian animator, promotes Philips radios. Normally commercials were for about three seconds. Pal's commercial extends to five minutes, where a girl dances along a large staircase, to the accompaniment of the song : " I saw the harbour lights." The Philips broadcast assures radio symphonies 'everyday in your home.' Warner Bros cartoon "Pigs in a polka" (3mins, sound, 1943,USA, colour) depicts the seven pigs story, with a twist. Brahms *Hungarian Dances* provides the score to animation, depicting pigs in respective houses, made of match sticks which inevitably crumble. After chasing a mouse around the trees, the pigs enter their brick house. The mouse enters the mortar house, playing a violin.

Since 1896, George Melies created filmed opera. Film occasionally got stuck, and special effects were created by stopping camera. Melies destroyed most of his films by putting them in a pit, and setting them on fire, in 1923. "Le Chaudron Internal-Magic cauldron" (3mins, 1903, France) was hand coloured. A girl is terrorized by two bare bodied men. A man and a woman are pushed inside a cauldron on fire. Buster Keaton and Eddie Cline's "One Week" (20 mins, 1920, USA) portray wedding bells have a sweet sound, but sour echo. Keaton has just married a beautiful girl. Coming out from church, they board a car, but are threatened by the bride's ex-suitor. While changing cars, Keaton loses the bride. Keaton is building a house from wooden planks. The planks go upside down, Keaton slips, and the piano tumbles on Keaton. A man is strung on the rooftop by chandelier ropes, Keaton crashes to the bath tub, when guests arrive for dinner, storm and rains lash the house. Keaton and his life feel the ground spinning, in the house of merry-go-round. After the storm, when the couple wake up, developers point to the house being on the wrong side of the rail tracks. The house is dismantled, and pulled on beer barrels, by car. When the train approaches, everything crashes.

David and Max Fleischer's "Ain't She Sheet" (8mins, 1933, USA) features a karaoke song by Lilian Roth to a backdrop of animation and barn dancing. Cats, rats, flies and horses sing and prance. There are cookies, free milk and barrels of liquor galore.

Pathe Studio's "The Mysterious Man" (5 min, 1910, France) presents acrobatic scenes of contortion. The man in acrobatic poses is in evident pain. The first American animation film is "Gertie the Trained Dinosaur" (5 mins, 1914, USA, Vitagraph) by Winsor McCay and George McManus. Winsor's car has a puncture before the Museum of Natural History in New York. People visit the museum and wonder at the skeletons of dinosaurs. A series of hand drawn cartoons and 2000 drawings configurate. A man who carries the slips and falls, and gags follow.

Normal film is spaced with drawings. Gertie the dinosaur, a sea snake and trees come alive. When Gertie's boss off stage cracks the whip, Gertie raises left foot, cries and eats a pumpkin. Jumbo the elephant plays and dances. The dinosaur flings the elephant into the lake. As Gertie jigs the charleston dance, the jumbo sprays water on Gertie.

Serge Bromberg's collection of early short films, in the package "Retour de flamme—Return of the Flame", is diverse and amusing, where celluloid transforms ordinary lives. □□