

PROJECT: EXOTIC EUROPE? TRAVELOGUES IN EARLY CINEMA

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In accordance with the goals of the *Raphael* Program, which supports "transnational cooperation projects between museum institutions for the enhancement of and accessibility to the heritage," films and film devices from each of the three participating archives will be restored. Beginning in Spring 2000, these films and film devices will be presented to the public in various forms:

- A DVD will provide a selection of twenty actuality films from the period between 1905 and 1925. These will be supplemented by five essays on cultural history (film clips with commentary or music), as well as a data bank with filmographic information.
- A video with 20 actuality films. This is intended for persons and/or institutions without DVD capacity.
- A travelling exhibition, which will be shown in Germany and Great Britain beginning in 2001.
- A film program - with live music - which will be shown in Spring 2000, corresponding with the release of the DVD.
- A catalogue, which will be available with the DVD or video, and which will also serve as an exhibition catalogue.

Nitrate goes DVD - On Presenting Early Nitrate Films with the New Digital Media

Up until the 1950s, all films were filmed on highly flammable nitrate film stock and thus, due to security reasons, could no longer be projected. As a consequence, these films are practically inaccessible to the present-day audience, with the exception of a few scholars and researchers. These films are carefully stored by film libraries and archives around the world, where their decay is slowed by methods of film preservation.

The actuality films we have chosen for the project are in part only available as single nitrate copies, partially as safety copies.¹ They do not belong to the canon of masterworks from the silent film era, and the names of the people who filmed them are in many cases unknown or forgotten. They are valuable as early historical documents on the everyday life and the longings of the people in the early twentieth century. They take us on idyllic river cruises, open unknown landscapes, show crafts and customs that have long since been forgotten. The aesthetics of these early non-fiction films should be seen in the context of earlier traditions in the visual arts as well as in the context of the technological developments in filming and projection. In the early twentieth century, a time of narrow conceptions of homeland and pronounced national feelings, these films

¹ Besides appropriate storage, preserving this film material includes cleaning, repair, and transfer to safety film stock (polyester film).

make an transnational perspective on Europe visible. A curious gaze falls on foreign countries with other 'exotic' ways of life: visual pleasure formed a central moment in the early cinema.

An imagined journey to a past Europe awaits today's audience. Traditional modes of access to these precious film images will be expanded by the use of new media, and the DVD will be tested as a pilot project for the archives. The cinema experience cannot and should not be replaced. The light and colour intensity of the nitrate originals and the irregular contrasts are already changed in copying the nitrate originals onto security film. In addition, the form of projection from the period, i.e., the soft light of a projector which brought the nitrate film images to light, is no longer available to later audiences.

Before now, the only alternative to cinematic viewing was taping films on video; with the problem of a loss of image quality. Video is already now supplemented by DVD (Digital Versatile Disc), and will eventually be replaced by this new technology. In this process, the film images are first transferred to DigiBeta, and then to a DVD; this allows the transformation of analog images into digital images with a stunningly high quality. Not only the films copied onto security film can be digitized, however. This technological innovation also allows the direct digitization of preserved nitrate copies in relatively good condition. Thus, losses of quality, which necessarily occur with the transfer between multiple film stocks and data carriers, are minimized. With digital editing, which is sometimes falsely termed (digital) restoration, the traces of time can be "erased." Scratches, faded colours or inconsistencies in lighting can be "filled in" and/or standardized through the digital editing process.

For film libraries and archives, digitization offers the possibility of making the films accessible to both researchers and a wider audience, without taxing the carefully preserved film copies. In this project, various possibilities presented by DVD will be explored:

- non-linear, linked informational structures: links between films and filmographic information, imagined trips through Europe (jukebox system), essays on cultural history, which can stimulate visual reception, and playfully and individually utilized;
- multilingual offerings;
- testing the publication of digitized film material.

The following are formulated as open questions:

- Does DVD address a broad younger public which can develop an interest in the materiality of film through the new technologies?
- Does the visual reception of this material simplify the access to an important period of film and cultural history?
- Can an awareness of the value and importance of the preservation of these film documents be mediated and/or improved by presenting appropriate information on the DVD (an introduction to film restoration, the illustration of different image qualities)?
- Does the medium encourage the viewer to become accustomed to polished digital images, or to what extent can it teach the viewer to perceive the difference between analog and electronic images?

If restoration and preservation are not only understood as a process of technological optimization, but rather take place in a reflexive confrontation with the medium itself, then today, approximately 100 years after the invention of film and on the verge of the digital age, we are challenged not only to confront the technological possibilities for innovation and their relevance for restoration and as data carriers for film material, but also with the preservation of the original material itself. In thirty or fifty years, it should still be possible to have access to the visual aesthetic of film which can only be perceived in the original.