May 4, 1965

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Two French "Primitives".

"Phantasmagoria" (Emil Cohl, Gaumont, 1909) no longer has the patina of movie "magic", and today the method of its simple animation is quite apparent. But in all other senses, use of the word "primitive" is almost an insult, for it is a smooth, graceful and imaginative little abstract drawn film which quite puts to shame the plodding and ugly "experimental" cartoons or drawn abstractions that are flung at us today.

"The Automatic Moving Company" has been identified by Guy Côté of the Cinematheque Canadienne as a 1910 subject originally called "Faithful Furniture", although the American title now affixed to it seems rather more to the point. Another experiment with stop-motion photography, this time with live action rather than drawn images, it is again remarkably smooth, good-humored, and imaginative.

"SUNNYSIDE" (First National, 1919) Written and directed by Charles Chaplin; Camera: Esolee Totheroh; 3 reels
With: Charlie Chaplin, Edna Purviance, Tom Wilson, Henry Bergman, Albert Austin, Loyal Underwood, Park Jones.

Not very popular in 1919, when Chaplin's two films ("Sunnyside" and "A Day's Pleasure") were both, and justifiably, considered a sad let-down after the Mutuals and his initial First Nationals ("A Dog's Life", "Shoulder Arms"), "Sunnyside" has been very elusive ever since and is one of the least known of all the Chaplins. Presumably Charlie himself has never been too pleased with it, since he has never seen fit to revive it in any form. However, it has remained something of a minor legend due to the "Fan" ballet scene which has been rhapsodised over in print (by Robert Payne, especially) even though such judgements can now be seen to have been made from publicity stills rather than from the film itself. The famous stills of this sequence bear almost no resemblance to the fairly ordinary content of the footage itself. Even meticulous Ted Huff fell into this trap. Quite obviously he had not had a chance to see the film for a great many years when he wrote his fine Chaplin book, as in the cast listings he indicates (though with a query) that the city slicker is played by Albert Austin, whereas Austin plays the doctor.

"Sunnyside" is a curious little film, neither very funny nor with much to offer in terms of pathos or drama, and even as a satire of the "True Heart Susie" or "Clockhopper" brand of rural romance so popular in 1919, it has little real point. Some of it is genuinely amusing -- the details of "deco" in the run-down hotel, Charlie mistaking a fat woman for one of his herd of cattle -- but on the whole it is so slight that it seems like a throwback to some of the lesser Essanays. Production values are cheap, with some quite shoddy sets, and the construction is haphazard to the point of laughable. It certainly seems incredible to have two quite separate and unrelated parts to one of them ill-defined, contained within one three-reeler. Some of the humor, though brushing the credibility of the Keystones, seems to have the tastelessness and nastiness which continued to crop up occasionally in his work, most spectacularly perhaps in "The King in New York". And even the Chaplin character seems to be in a kind of limbo here, more related to Stan Laurel than to the traditional Chaplin tramp. Coming after the Mutuels and "A Dog's Life", the shortcomings of "Sunnyside" are really inexcusable, and the knowledge that he is just big enough to do a lot of nonsense, considerably less than his best -- and get away with it. Nevertheless, no matter how irked we may be by the film, we should still be grateful for the chance to see it. The print is reasonably good, though a bit ragged in the scene of Charlie riding the bull and being thrown from it (prior to his dazed dream); the titles are in French (and simple French at that), but even so the plot is sufficiently slim, and the pantomime sufficiently eloquent, for them to be
no problem at all. "A Day's Pleasure" was the sole remaining "lost" film from his First National period, and we have been promised a print of that for showing later in the year.

**INTERMISSION**

"SAFETY LAST" (Pathe, 1923) Directors: Sam Taylor, Tim Whelan, Fred Newmeyer. Story by Hal Roach; camera: Walter Lundin; Production associates: Fred Guiol, C.E. Christensen, Jack Murphy. 6 reels.
With: Harold Lloyd, Mildred Davis (The Girl); Billie LeBlanc (The Pal); Noah Young (The Law); Nestor B. Clarke (The Floorwalker); Mickey Daniels (The Kid); Anna Townsend (The Grandmother).

Later Lloyd films may have been more elaborate in production values, richer in individual comedy sequences, more profitable at the boxoffice, but "Safety Last" remains the "definitive" Lloyd film, and in the long run, probably his best. As a vehicle for the Lloyd character -- half Charlie Chaplin, half Douglas Fairbanks -- and as a platform for his unique formula of comedy, a dash of sentiment and a stress on physical thrills -- "Safety Last" just couldn't be more typical. The very first sequence is one of those deliberately misleading establishing gags so popular in the 20's, and from them on it races and bounds with never a stale spot. Every single sequence, be it comic or "dramatic", is approached solely from the angle of the gag, avoiding the landlady; being late for work; buying a trinket of jewelry (where Harold's hands unconsciously imitate the anticipatory hand-rubblings of the jeweller); the most commonplace incidents are worked -- and successfully too -- solely for their laugh content.

Lloyd himself, unlike Chaplin, Keaton and Langdon, was not individually funny. His humor was the humor of the gag-writer, or the mechanised, manufactured situation; despite his own winning and pleasant personality, and unlike, say, that of the other three giants, it does not work on its own. Seen privately, or with an audience of only two or three, Lloyd's comedies often seem forced, even unfunny. Seen -- as they were intended to be seen -- with a large audience, where laughter engenders laughter, and where the shared thrill and the shared laugh create a planned but genuine reaction, they work beautifully. The cleverness and charm of the first half of "Safety Last" tends to be overshadowed by the prolonged building-climbing sequence in the latter half, but this is understandable. This kind of stuff has never been done better than it is here, certainly not in talkies, where sound took it out of the realm of semi-fantasy, and where the modern labor-saving devices of back projection and other trick effects reminded one how studio bound it could all be. Here, despite hidden nets, occasional doubles and one or two trick angles, it is obviously the real thing -- funny, thrilling, almost beyond belief, especially when one recalls that Lloyd has no fingers on one hand, and thus is working under a real handicap in the many scenes where he hangs from windows and ledges.

**EXTRA:** Since tonight's program is conveniently short, and to avoid the loss of a choice but transient item, we have added an extra feature to tonight's show.


Through the early '30's, First National turned out some working little program thrillers and melodramas, films like "Pibbubl Enemy's Wife", "Doctor Socrates" and "Bureau of Missing Persons". Certainly no major rediscovery of Roy Del Ruth's, it nevertheless has the same cracking pace and irreverence as his "Blessed Event". Potentially grisly material is made genuinely funny by tasteful handling and underplayed cold-blooded delivery; it's surprising how funny discussions about stitched-together corpses, or a murdered body having been ground up for fertilizer, can be - punctuated by the not entirely pre-Code question, "Have you been smoking hookah?". Paul O'Brien and dignified Lewis Stone make a superb team, and the fast-paced story is further speeded up by such devices as the iris-out, the swish pan, and the habit of starting scenes without establishing shots, cutting right into an opening door and so on. Incidentally, supplementary plot-lines of two earlier 1933 releases, "The Sphinx" and "Footlight Parade", are casually picked up and tossed in for good measure. But there was poetic justice in tonight's ghastly "Melina Mercari's Greece" tv-er; the opening shot of Melina appearing from behind a sea of balloons, which she bursts with her cigarette, is stolen from one of these old NB rip-offers -- Davis' entrance in "Fog Over Frisco".

--WKEverson