
A reminder: Because there are 5 Tuesdays in March, there will be no show on the first of them. Tuesday March 1st. We'll return on the 8th, and our News Bulletin covering March-April-May will be mailed to you during the first week in March.

Tuesday, February 15th, 1966
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

An Announcement
As those of you who were present last week are aware, we've added an extra feature - Warners' "Central Park" (1932) - to tonight's program. On the surface this is outrageously bad programming, and we make no bones about that. There are extenuating circumstances however; for one thing, "Central Park" is conveniently short, and if we don't grab it while it's in transit, it may never appear again. Secondly, we are scheduling it last on the program, so that those who feel that the cinema had nothing more to say after about 1925 can leave with their illusions intact.A "Roue" is an exhausting film, and many of you may well wish to leave at that point, not too exhausted we trust to pay your dollar first. On the other hand, others who are exhausted may feel that a snappy 57 minute programmer is just what they need as a quick pick-me-up. We are holding over the reel of trailers until a March program in view of tonight's added length, but those of you concerned about transportation needn't worry about this being an all-night orgy. "La Roue" is the full 12 reels we were expecting -- but it does not need silent speed projection very often. With the occasional slowdowns, it still runs in the neighborhood of 2 hours, 20 minutes at 20 frames; all told, our total running time tonight should not be more than 3 hours. Incidentally those of you who had to make The Great Decision tonight in choosing between "La Roue" and "Salome" can be reassured; the Nazimova print is ours, and will be slipped into a future Huff show for the benefit of those who missed it tonight.  

"La ROUE" ("The Wheel") France, 1921-22-23; released 1923.
Directed and edited by Abel Gance; scenario by Gance and Blaise Cendrars; photographed by Lu-C.Henrij Buiard, Buverger; original musical score by Arthur Honnegger; Assistant Director, Blaise Cendrars. This print: 12 reels. Original length: see notes. With Severin-Mars (Sisip); Ivy Close (Nora); Gabriel de Gravone (Elie); Pierre Magnier (M. de Hardam); and Georges Tarof, Maxdian, Gil Clary.

For information incorporated into these notes, grateful acknowledgement is made to David Stewart Huff and Gerald D. McDonald.

I still await the experience of being totally bowled over by Abel Gance, an experience I honestly want to have and feel that I should have, but which becomes increasingly unlikely with the passing years. "Napoleon" quite took my breath away, but the 75 minute version that we ran some years ago, minus the triple-screen of course, could in no way be considered representative of his original work. Both versions of "J'Aime", "Beethoven", "The End of the World" -- all had their moments -- and their limitations. His "Cyrano e D'Artagnan" at the 1964 NY Film Festival was a delight, and a reassuring reminder that a director who started prior to 1910 still hasn't run out of steam at the age of 75, but it was a pastiche albeit a skillful and accomplished one.

Many historians, and especially the French, consider "La Roue" to be Gance's finest film as opposed to "Napoleon" which they find stodgy and even corny. Some have even called "La Roue" the French answer to "Intolerance", and quite certainly there are affinities, "La Roue", like "Intolerance", is a kind of Bible on the trivia of human existence. Much of it is fantastically advanced for 1922 and there is no kind of film grammar which is not explored in one way or another, be it editing, cross-cutting, framing and masking, use of landscapes, symbolism, superimposition and other trick effects and what have you -- quite apart from its poetic, dramatic and avant-garde qualities.
In performance however, it rarely equals the subtlety and underplaying that Griffith was noted for, its sentiment too much than surpasses even the eloquence of D.W. in that department, and sometimes becomes quite ludicrous. On one level however the two masters stand side by side -- neither was on very safe ground with conventional "comedy relief" and the actual subject of the film, that position here is a literal equivalent of Craghton Hale in "Orphans of the Storm".

Frankly, and it may be that I just don't "like" this any more than I do the writings of Signor Antonio, it's difficult to understand the "ignorance of these themes" that Gance clearly saw in this story, even allowing for his mystical and metaphysical approach to film. At best, "La Roue" seems to be a kind of rugged and 60-romanticalised family melodrama, too specific between Gosta Borking in Sweden and the Forsythes in England. The characters and
events seem to have no meaning or significance other than their obvious ones, and certainly there is no underlying theme or statement as in "Intolerance". Frequent titular references to Kipling, Shakespeare and Hugo are not always apt, and sometimes seem merely pretentious. Too often the maze of seemingly irrelevant or illogical detail works against one's taking it entirely seriously too. The charming little cottage situated right in the middle of the scene is an even more fascinating idea, but one wonders how the two little toddlers ever survived to adulthood in such a death-trap! One wonders too at the standards of the French railroad system, when an engineer who is clearly unstable and seems to go berserk, trying to wreck locomotives, with frightening regularity, is finally pensioned off to a soft job after a final accident because of his "previous good record". The dividing line between reality and mysticism is a thin one, and occasionally that line becomes blurred so that one feels for all the world as though one is seeing Buster Keaton doing "The General" straight.

"La Roue" is confusing, bizarre and wild. It tends to run downhill. Yet one cannot dismiss or dislike any film that had so many good things in it. The camerawork, even in this inadequate print, can be seen to have been truly stunning. The engineer's mad dash to apparent destruction in his locomotive is a superlatively shot and edited sequence. The "Funeral" of the train is a beautiful and touching episode too, as is his own ultimate death, sitting by a window, watching as his daughter joins a group of dancers celebrating on the mountain slopes.

When originally shown in December of 1922, the film had a running time of 32 reels - or some nine hours. At that time it was shown in three parts, on three successive nights. After a few months, Pathé decided it must be cut to more wieldy footage, and Gance himself carefully cut it to a final length somewhere between four and five hours. He further cut it when the film was reissued with sound in the 30s. When the French Cinematheque started work on assembling the version that is being shown this evening, it was found that very little of the film survived in one place. Several years of work were required to unearth footage on 35mm, 16mm and 9.5. Fortunately the original script had been published, and from that it was possible to reconstruct this version, though naturally with considerable variation of quality, and some of the mountain scenes are quite faded and scratched, although under such circumstances one can hardly complain. UCLA undertook the task of providing the English titles, no small job in that most of the original captions were written in a translation-defying idiom of railroad slang which tested the resources of no less than three French professors! Only one scene that was found was not included in this print -- a scene of the hero reciting poetry while dressed as a Medieval knight, and reportedly so embarrassingly bad that respect for Gance's reputation won out over archival pride in preservation.

Séverin-Mars, who plays the lead, was gravely ill during production and died soon after the film's completion. Like Henri Bére, the main cameraman, also photographed Bresson's recent Joan of Arc film, the original score was composed by Arthur Honegger, but proved so complicated and difficult to play that it was dropped after the original run. Honegger salvaged an early portion of it and rearranged it as "Pacific 231"; the music of course was used in the French short of that title some 15 years ago. Which brings us to a final point -- music. "La Roue", even more than "Intolerance", almost defies scoring, and if it defeated Honegger, it's no wonder that it has defeated Evers. At the very least, the film would need weeks of careful experimentation to come up with a satisfying score on records or piano, and even if we had that kind of time, the print has been available to us for a few days only. An initial impulse was to run the film completely silent, since its appeal is academic rather than emotional, and one soon finds oneself supplying one's own music. However, the film never was shown that way, and we'll do our best to come up with some kind of a score for it. But bear with us, as N. Gance is prone to change nuances rather faster than we can change records. The main thing is that here it is at last, and a full 12 reels of it -- though frankly all of that footage doesn't make it any less mystifying than it was when we ran a much shorter four reel version to a small audience at the Film Group several years ago.

INTERMISSION
"CENTRAL PARK" (First National, 1932) Directed by John Adolfi
Scenario by Ward Morehouse and Earl Baldwin from a story by Morehouse; camera: Sid Hickox; 6 reels.

After "La Rue" here we are back to slick assembly-line merchandising -- with a vengeance. Seldom has so much incident been packed into a 57-minute economy-size box, and the amazing thing is that John Adolfi -- a rather slow and stately film-maker, better attuned to the George Arliss vehicles -- manages to keep it moving along as though he were a Nick Grinde or a William Beaudine!

"Nothing ever happens in Central Park" murmurs kindly old Henry B. Walthall, who has clearly seen "Grand Hotel", and from then on we have an escaped lunatic, a rampaging lion, young love, racial humor, shootings, sentiment, a whale of a fight and a lively car chase -- plus plenty of snappy music, including the main song from "Blessed Event", surprisingly elaborate sets at times, and a generous supply of extras. It never slows down long enough for one to dissect all the cliches, and at that not all of the scattered plot lines wind up quite as one assumes that they will.

What is especially pleasing about the film today is the surprising amount of footage actually shot in Central Park. Most of the principals obviously never left Hollywood, and there is the expected use of doubles, back projection and studio reconstructions. But there is also a very great deal of authentic and prolonged Central Park footage -- and not just establishing scenes either, but generous slices of plot and/or action, as in the climactic car chase -- even though the gangsters do come scropper by crashing their truck over a cliff that I can't place in Central Park unless I know it today! Far more ambitious films set in New York or Central Park -- for example "Hallelujah I'm a Fug", "It Happened On 5th Avenue", "Up in Central Park" -- shot far less location stuff, and were less meticulous about Hollywood reconstructions too. In that sense, this is a most interesting little film -- and for those of us who are comparative newcomers to this big wicked city, it's rather sad to look back on gentler days when shepherds and flocks of sheep roamed the wide open spaces between 5th and Central Park West, and no one would think of mugging you because it was so much more fun to take Tommy-guns into the Casino and do it in grand style.

One wonders perhaps whether Adolfi either sold Warners on the idea of the film, or was assigned to shoot all this extra footage while he was in NY that same year to shoot a Central Park sequence for the Arliss film "The Man Who Played God".

-Walt K. Rverson