THE CINEPHILE'S GUIDE TO SILENT FILM

A Journey Into Film's Forgotten Past
The films that I reference in this periodical are wonderful pieces of both art and history, but not all silent films have aged well. Honestly, a lot of silent films are products of their time, that being the early 20th century (not that these things were ever ok). Many silent films feature offensive and/or misrepresentative portrayals of minorities, especially racial and ethnic minorities. Racism, misogyny, ableism, and generally exploitative content is unfortunately easy to come by in these films. I have a deep love for the medium, but it would be incredibly irresponsible to not denounce the more reprehensible content produced during this time. Unlike today, these movies were not rated, so this time period is sort of the “Wild West” of cinema history. These movies can be offensive, distasteful, strange, violent, creepy, sexual, they can be anything really. So in other words my dear reader, please take precaution when looking into this period of film history. Some of cinema’s highest highs and lowest lows came from the era, and depending on your comfort level and feelings towards certain things, this may or may not be the rabbit hole for you to go down.
All of my life, for as long as I could remember, I have loved film. It’s like an artistic soup of everything I admire in art. Acting, editing, cinematography, costuming, sets, need I say more? Silent films showcase the primitive, unique, and resourceful versions of all of these elements. I still remember the first time I sat down to watch a silent film. It was George Melies’ classic 1902 film, “A Trip To the Moon”. I had found it while scrolling endlessly and brainlessly on Netflix on a cold autumn day. I was 10 years old and was curious how there was a film from 1902 on Netflix. The history nerd I was just couldn’t resist and I turned it on. The next 16 minutes of footage blew my stupid little child brain into pieces and I became a life-long cinephile from that point on. Ever since that day, I’ve explored the vast annals of film history. The pure creativity and variety present in these movies is hard to really describe in words, but in this little zine, I will try my darndest.
The earliest films were silent, as audio and visual technology were largely developed separately until the late 1920s when successful experiments combining the two began to be made. The first films hardly had a narrative, unless you count people walking around as a plot. The title of the earliest film with a plot is often given to different films, but the most widely accepted answer would be the Lumière Brother’s 1896 film “L’Arroseur arrosé”.

Over the next 3 or so decades, silent film evolved from strange, non-linear experiments, to grand, feature length epics that pulled out all the stops. The style of acting seen in these films developed as well, with a special niche being carved out for silent film stars. Faces were really the name of the game, with the emotions of the characters being communicated by the facial expressions and mannerisms of the actors. As for the technical aspects of film, cinematography was born in the films of German expressionists and Soviet “montage” makers. Special effects, or “magic tricks” as they were known as at the turn of the century were revolutionized with techniques like pixelation and stop motion. Even today, these techniques are still used in almost every film that comes out.
How To Experience Silent Cinema

One of the biggest “turn-offs” for people when it comes to silent film, is the “silent” aspect of it. We’re so used to sound films and the modern style of pacing we see in modern films, so watching an hour or longer silent film made for audiences in the 1910s or 20s seems like a gargantuan task for some. I can assure you though, that there are a lot of silent films that are worth at least one viewing. The other line I hear a lot is “Well I don’t want to read my movies”. Fun fact! When I hear this, my blood boils and my eyes pop out of my skull in a blinding hot rage! Jokes aside, this is what people on the internet would call “a bad take”. I’m so sorry that it takes effort to engage in art and media. If it helps, maybe put open some Subway Surfers gameplay in another window. Seriously though, reading intertitles is not as hard as it seems. Think of it like a comic with text bubbles, or like a subtitled anime with the TV on mute. I beg of people to give these films a try, and to go into it with the understanding that it’s going to be different from the cinema experiences we’ve come to expect in our modern times. Try to forget about your expectations and just go into it with an open mind. Maybe you’ll find yourself getting really into it, just like I did.
Where To Watch Silent Films

The biggest hurdle for getting into this era of films is knowing where to find the films themselves. Unlike a lot of newer films, most silent movies are not easily accessible on mainstream streaming services. Luckily, money is not really a big issue in acquiring silent films. The best places to look are free streaming services like Tubi, Freevee, The Roku Channel, and others. These are free services accessible in the United States with a lot of older content from the silver screen and television. They also have a lot of smaller, independent films as well. However, the versions available on these platforms often feature royalty free music tracks that drone on loop for the entire film. My recommendation is to watch them on mute for your own sanity. Another great resource is websites like the Internet Archive, Ubu.com, Wikipedia, Vimeo, Dailymotion, and obviously YouTube. These websites are accessible in more locations and are completely free for use. Some of these websites do have advertisements, and some of them do feature a lot of NSFW content, so be careful when browsing. Another great way to experience these films is in person. Indie movie theaters, art venues, and universities, are examples of places to look for screenings of silent films. Not only do you get a better image, but some use the original scoring or new scoring alongside the films, and some are paired with talks by film experts who can provide further context.
Lost Media

The biggest problem facing fans of silent cinema is the never-ending plight of lost media. Lost media is the term for any piece of media not easily accessible or accounted for. It is estimated that around 75% of silent movies are lost, never to be seen again. So why are these films so elusive? There are many reasons but the biggest are the films' physical makeup, shotty preservation efforts, and censorship. Film stock was originally made of silver nitrate until the mid 20th century. Silver nitrate is extremely flammable and is generally chemically unstable. Preservation was not really taken seriously until the use of silver nitrate film was long over, so for decades many films fell victim to large fires in studios and archives and overall decomposition. Some of the most sought after lost silent films, namely “Cleopatra” starring Theda Bara and “London After Midnight” starring Lon Chaney were victims of this poor preservation. Some films however, were victims of censorship. Some of cinema’s firsts in terms of representation happened in the silent era, from the first film to feature positive gay representation “Anders als die Andern”, to some of the earliest films made by and starring Black people were lost due to active campaigns to destroy the films or hide them away. Although some progress has been made over the years to repair and find some films and film segments, that 75% statistic hasn’t really budged.
RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE EDITOR

Comedy
• “The General” (1926), Starring Buster Keaton
• “The Freshman” (1925), Starring Harold Lloyd
• “The Gold Rush” (1925), Starring Charlie Chaplin

Drama & Romance
• “Wings” (1927), Starring Clara Bow and Gary Cooper
• “Battleship Potemkin” (1925), Directed by Sergei Eisenstein
• “Beyond Our Gates” (1920), Directed by Oscar Micheaux
• “The Passion of Joan of Arc” (1928)
• “Anders als die Andern” (1919), Starring Conrad Veidt
• “The Flying Ace” (1926)
• “Napoleon” (1927)
Horror
- “The Phantom of the Opera” (1925), Starring Lon Chaney
- “Haxan: Witchcraft Through the Ages” (1922)
- “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari” (1920), Starring Conrad Veidt
- “Nosferatu” (1922), Directed by F.W. Murnau
- “A Page of Madness” (1926)

Science Fiction
- “Metropolis” (1927), Directed by Fritz Lang
- “The Lost World” (1925)
- “A Trip to the Moon” (1902), Directed by George Melies
- “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” (1920), Starring John Barrymore
- “A Trip to Mars” (1918)
“History is a jangle of accidents, blunders, surprises and absurdities, and so is our knowledge of it, but if we are to report it at all we must impose some order upon it.”

- Henry Steele Commager, Historian