

## AURA FOOTPRINTS OF EARLY CINEMA

By Cesar De La Rosa Anaya

“The passage of time”, the phrase we use to imply what something has undergone through the years, according to dictionaries refers purely to the duration of a particular phenomenon, event or object. But this is just a cold and simplistic definition: “the passage of time” can involve more, implying loss of the essence, deterioration of the original, change of the momentum, fragmentation of an object. Early cinema is all about the passage of time, because this affects the ways in which a silent film will be researched, preserved, restored and appreciated by people of later generations. Many of the silent films that survive are now around a hundred years old or even older, so that many of them have gone through a variety of changes, deterioration and fragmentation that have disturbed their essence. Many of the films, reels, collections and images of the early cinema are recreated from what remains of their cinematographic past; they are no longer integral works, but fragments of celluloid, memories that no longer exist as initially conceived. This is one of the main concerns in the field of digital film restoration.

Every day we are losing silent films, owing to the insufficient or inadequate physical conditions under which they have been preserved. Deterioration of the physical state of a film will inevitably be reflected in the degradation of its aesthetic and cinematographic qualities. Discontinuity of scenes, degradation of the original colour, misinterpretation of the narrative, instability and loss of image quality, inadequate research and associated digital issues deny the current viewer a cinematic experience true to the original. Paolo Cherchi Usai has written extensively about this problem in his book *The Death of the Cinema* where he states that the destruction of the moving image is always correlated to the physical and chemical factors affecting the preservation of film media. He also points out that only a few people appreciate how these conditions affect the aesthetics and pragmatics of the viewing experience. For Paolo Cherchi Usai the extinction of the cinematographic experience (early cinema experience) is natural: many ephemeral forms of human expression, like some oral traditions, inevitably vanish with time. The history of the moving image has been its destruction; the main target should be to recover the experience of the first spectators, an aim that is easily dismissed as an

empirical and abstract impossibility (Cherchi Usai, 2000:15-18). Summarizing, we are in the process of losing silent films and at the same time the original experience - the way they were received and enjoyed at the time of their first appearance. For film restorers this is the main challenge of every project: the concern about how much of the original film it is technically possible to restore and how much it is not. Besides they have to think in the proper work methods, tools, crews and perspectives for the digital restoration. Perhaps we have to approach this problem wondering to ourselves: are we really restoring the original experience of the early cinema? Is it really necessary to do the complete restoration of a silent film? Maybe a good way to get the answers is to start by considering silent films as fragmented old objects, very far from complete and modern artworks. Based on that we will have a closer perspective in applying the most appropriate restoration work method.

First we need to talk about the most common factors or characteristics (physical and digital) that identify the cinematographic experience of the silent films. For this, we will use examples of some films exhibited in Le Giornate del Cinema Muto 2013 in Pordenone, Italy. The factors are:

#### Loss of the “antique” of the image

Generally the qualities valued in a filmic image are resolution, stability, screen size, grain, cleanliness and other technical values that can be achieved in digital restoration. However, in early cinema material, the restoration criteria should not necessarily pursue a complete intervention. Because something that gives value to a silent film does not essentially have to do with its image quality, but with its antiquity. Walter Benjamin suggests that works of art have an “Aura”, a quality of authenticity that surrounds the work and catches the original sensations, ideas and techniques of the artist in a unique moment and in a specific context of its inspiration. Within the story that a work of art has undergone throughout its unique existence, are transformations in its physical structure effected by the passage of time. In Benjamin’s words, the Aura is: “A special weave of space and time: unique appearance of a distance, however close it may be” (Benjamin, 2003:42-47). The passage of time gives the “Aura” to the piece, without any time traces: works of art have no history and purpose. Although he was applying this concept to classical art forms (painting, sculpture, photography, etc.) the German author left the concept open to all art forms – though he specifically mentions the cinema as the main example of mechanical reproduction of art

(industrialization of cinema and mass reproduction of films) which has resulted in the gradual fading away of the Aura.

The “Aura” concept is very similar to the “Patina” concept in the restoration of paintings. Cesare Brandi uses a definition from Balducci to explain this concept: “Voice used by painters, also tells skin, and it is this universal darkness that the time appears in the paintings, also sometimes favors them” (Brandi, [1988] 1995:89-90). As in painting, “Patina” could appear in the early cinema, giving a specific darkness (time traces) to the celluloid that only silent films can have. The material (celluloid support) is the medium for the image, but never the image itself. Works where the material thinking rather than the image prevails are only handcrafts, not art. In painting and cinema alike, if the material thinking prevailed over the image value, we would lose the darkness that favours them.

Some silent films might acquire a kind of “Aura” or “Patina” from their physical deterioration - instability, color degradation, detachment of emulsion, stripes and scratches generated by the passage of time. These degradations are not only image flaws, but equally become footprints of the films’ Aura and history. It is crucial that the film restorer maintains some evidence of the deteriorations in the image, the Aura footprints of the film, which define its essence. One film shown in Pordenone that demonstrated digital restoration that maintained the degradations and the Aura footprints was *Prichozi Z Temnot: Arrival of Darkness* (CS 1921): here was a traditional digitalization of the film, providing the right color and contrast, but not attempting to obscure scratches, instability and even detachment of emulsion. This gave the sense of watching an ancient and tenebrous film – a sense appropriate to the narrative, a dark love story set in East Europe. It was not evident if the signs of degradation were retained by choice, but the final effect was to enhance the cinema experience.

Unfortunately, more often digital restoration processes sets out to completely alter or erase such inherent degradations. Current practice in digital laboratories around the world rarely considers retaining a degree of original degradation in the restoration process, because clients do not acknowledge or care about this possibility: they are generally concerned with being able to use the

films on big screens or in DVD compilations, without any philosophy of restoration. The cost of the processes has inevitably related them to short-term commercial interests.

On one hand, we find film restorations with poor or elementary digitalization, simply reproducing the physical deterioration without intervention, so that overexposed grain results in pixelization of the image, detachment of emulsion results in a loss of textures, degradation of the colour generates artificial colors, and multiple splices result in flicker or instability. These common issues – mainly overexposed grain, instability and flat image – were evident in some shorts included in the Joly-Normandin compilation (FR 1896-1897).

On the contrary, we are more likely to encounter excessive intervention in digitally restored films – meaning that the image looks very clear and sharp, stable and colourful, without visible trace of degradation. But this perfection in the image, erasing traces of aging from time, sometimes produces a misleading sensation of watching a modern instead of an old silent film. This is not useful for its cinematographic experience. In *Le Giornate 2013* there was no concrete example of this kind of digital issue; but a notable example is Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane: 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary Restored Edition* by Warner Brothers. At the film's premiere in 1941, Welles had told a journalist of his dissatisfaction with the technical results. The new digital version tried to improve elements with which Welles was not satisfied - the radical depth of focus, dramatic backlighting and unconventional framing with which Welles revolutionized moviemaking. Yet the result is that the high resolution and great cleanliness of the image in this version creates the sensation that it was filmed days ago and not decades ago. Traces of the antiquity of the image are erased, taking away something of the physical history of the film accumulated through the years. To achieve a balance between the level of digital restoration and the level of the original film degradation seems to be the desideratum to conserve the film's Aura.

#### *Fragmented film research and documentation.*

Today the credit titles of a film record the whole production documentation – production companies, producer, director, writers, editors, crew, actors, locations, *ad infinitum*. In the early cinema age this was not a common practice, so that to recover this kind of information about a century-old film is a challenge. Much of this information is appropriate and helpful to the restorer

- the year of production and release, the film makers, the original style of colours, collection history, versions and intertitles. Such references, all of possible value to the film, may be scattered in archives, libraries, universities and film museums around the world. The film researcher has to fit together all these fragmented pieces – always knowing how to evaluate data that is erroneous, misinterpreted or incomplete. An example at the Giornate was a film from the American Film Institute (AFI) collection: *The Mexican Revolution: Francisco Villa in Ojinaga* (US 1913-1923) for which there still remains doubt about the actual camera operator of the reportage: documents of the Associated Press reporter state that Charles Pryor (president of El Paso Feature Film Co.) shot the footage of the Battle of Ojinaga, while records of the Mutual Film Corporation indicate that the subsequently famous cinematographer Charles Rosher filmed the same historic event in Ojinaga (Poiré, 2013). The mystery remains unsolved.

Fortunately there still exist some films for which much documentation survives – for instance the films shot by the Joly-Normandin system (FR 1896-1897), of which all those known to survive were presented at Le Giornate 2013. These consist of actualities, short comedies, sports, holiday moments, travel films. Many original documents of Henri Joly and Ernest Normandin survive, revealing their contributions to early cinema, such as their unique apparatus, with an exceptional five perforations to a frame, their innovatory camera angles and use of wide shot, and, of course, their valuable film collections. We also have information regarding some of the locations and people filmed.

The assembly - as far as is known in chronological order – together with the varied documentation is a great achievement by the project manager Camille Blot-Wellens. The result is a construction of cinematographic fragments of forgotten moments left us by people that no longer exist. Each short film, with its specific conditions and treatment, each with its own Aura footprints, becomes part of a whole filmic memory. A fragmented conception in this kind can help to understand the limits and possibilities of a silent film digital restoration.

### *Fragmentation of narrative*

Physical degradation and digital issues are not the only factors that affect the silent film's essences. Misplaced portions of the same filmic work can also fragment the whole narrative of the

film. Generally, silent films have passed through many hands and places over time - many projections and resulting repairs, moving between collections and archives, copying and reprinting. In these situations inevitably frames, segments and even complete reels can be lost. Every film begins life with its own and unique narrative construction, editing and cinematographic rhythm. Losing any fragment of the film will inevitably affect its original narrative.

This mainly results in discontinuity in the scenes and editing. When frames, images or reels are lost, scenes and sequences will be incomplete. Thus in silent films we may encounter inexplicable continuity jumps or cut scenes resulting in inconsistency in the narrative. Some films may have so many missing parts that they are incomprehensible without the intermediation of a researcher or film restorer. A second issue is when hands other than the author's have manipulated the film footage. This can result in an inexplicable disorder of scenes and events within the film. This practice is often due to generations of who have re-inserted missing parts, without knowing where they belong in the original narrative. Sometimes documentation and research may make it possible to restore a faithful narrative, but again, when information is lacking, it is best to maintain the film editing as found.

However, this narrative fragmentation, far from being considered another shortcoming to restore, should be considered (like the antiquity of the image) as part of the film itself. Discontinuity in the scenes and editing manipulation are quite frequent characteristics of old silent films, though not so commonly of more recent sound films. The issues again can be seen as distinctive Aura footprints of early cinema. Festivals explore ways to keep these specific characteristics intact, while making the film accessible to an audience. At the 2013 Giornate it was possible to see two excellent shows based on films with only fragmented narratives.

The Japanese *benshi* Ichiro Kataoka, performed for five silent films, providing his own story interpretations. In particular, the surviving extract from *Chikemuri Takatanobaba: Blood-splattered Takatanobaba* (JP 1927) showed how a fragment of a film can give a new interpretation of the story, regardless of the missing elements. The extract represents the only reel surviving from the original eleven reels that came into existence, so Kataoka uses his *benshi* performance to fill out the narrative space left by the ten missing reels. In this way he provides a

new way to experience the film, not necessarily close to the original version, but trying to keep the its original essence of the story.

The second example was the world premiere of a lost film by Orson Welles, *Too much Johnson*, (US 1938), devised as episodes in a stage production. In fact the film was never shown, and what was long believed to be the only print of the film was destroyed in a fire in Welles' home. The material shown was in fact found in Italy, and had eventually found its way to Pordenone. A major project was initiated by George Eastman House and the American National Film Preservation Foundation to restore these cans of film composed of work material, with only a few sequences with some kind of editing. To show the footage without the help of an intermediary would have resulted in an incomprehensible cinematic experience. In this case research from production references (filming notes and production dates, script sketches, locations, crew, cast, budget, etc.), allowed better understanding of the fragmented story. Paolo Cherchi Usai presented a commentary to explain the story behind the debuts of Orson Welles, the problems and achievements that the unit had to deal with, and the locations used in the film. This show presented a unique cinematographic experience – revealing a film that was never finished or never released. Thus in this case there is no first cinematic experience to recover: an original version never existed. *Too Much Johnson's* world premiere was a definitive example of how a fragmented film might still provide a cinematic experience close to the original essence, with its Aura footprints that time has given to it.

So we can conclude that a total, 100% restoration of a silent film, even if it were technically possible, is not necessarily desirable. However complete our information and references, the film itself has changed with “the passage of time”. There is no point in trying to recreate a unique experience in time and space: better to try to adapt the early cinema experience to our own times. In 2014, a silent film will never be the same as when it was released in 1914 as when it is shown in 2014 – whether it is shown in the reverence of Pordenone's Verdi Theater or the Dolby Theater in Los Angeles, USA. Nor will a silent film restoration be the same if made by L'Immagine Ritrovata in Bologna, or by Éclair in Paris, or Haghefilm in Amsterdam, or the restoration laboratory of Cineteca Nacional in Mexico City. A digital film restoration will depend on the institute, time, context, exhibition conditions and film perspectives on which the restoration is based. Each and every restoration project of the same film

could lead to different early cinema experiences. So to try to recover the original experience of the long-vanished first spectators is an utopiam concept of restoration.

Just like we have being suggesting along this essay, in order to adapt the early cinema experiences to the current generation, and the ones to come, we shall not modify nor correct digitally (in a huge level) the fragmentation or the aging of silent films, finding the right balance between the restoration and the original deteriorations of the film should be an useful method to the workflows. Nevertheless, when the film presents a high degree of deterioration and fragmentation is almost impossible to comprehend the story, the image, the research and the digital restoration work behind the film. Perhaps a way to adapt its early cinema experience to current generations would it be using a kind of intermediary between the silent film and the spectators within cinema theaters, may assists to understand everything about the digital restoration processes. Intermediaries such like the *Benshi* or *Too much Johnson* cases exemplify how someone (film restorer, critic, project manager or performer) standing front the audience explaining about the restoration behind (achievements and limitations) during all the movie could help to understood the cinema experience. But especially, telling about the Aura footprints traced in the footage. In this way, the intermediary would explicate the fragmentations and aging produced by the passage of time and its value to the film.

In *The Mexican Revolution: Francisco Villa in Ojinaga* (US 1913-1923) an intermediary may have helped in the understanding of this digital restoration work. Unfortunately, this did not happen and the Aura footprints digitally preserved (in image, research and narrative) were not fully understood by the audience, despite the information presented in the introductory message. The assistance of an intermediary will depend on each film, project and physical conditions, but could represent a chance to keep the early cinema experience alive in some way. No matter how many restorations or changings of support the film could suffer, if we respect and explain the Aura footprints given by the years in every silent film, the early cinema essence could prevail through time.



## **Bibliography**

Benjamin, Walter, La Obra de Arte en la Época de la reproductibilidad técnica, México: Editorial Itaca, 2003.

Brandi, Cesare, Teoría de la Restauración, Madrid: Alianza Editorial, [1988] 1995.

Cherchi Usai, Paolo, La Muerte del Cine, Barcelona: Editorial Laertes, 2005.

Poiré, Sophie Charlotte, Colección AFI: Reporte de Investigación y de Restauración, México: Cineteca Nacional (unpublished), 2013.

Rohrbach, Nadya, Restauration du Fonds Joly-Normandin, France: Memoriav (web channel), 1997.