



The Silent Flickers Pages

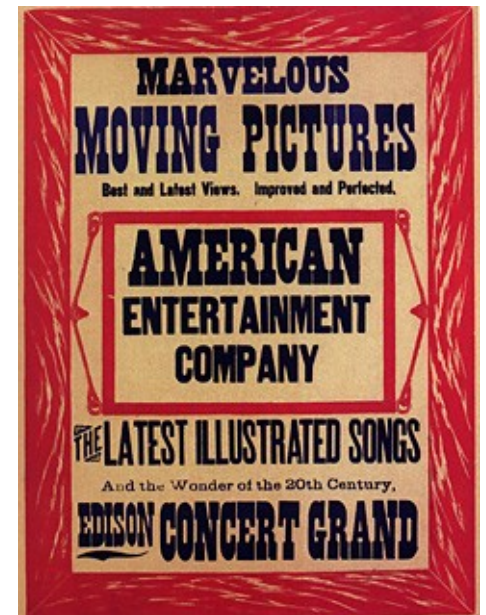
The Silent Screen

Silent films had never truly been silent, of course. Nearly all of them had a specific musical accompaniment, and the bigger flicks had complete original scores that in larger theaters were played by a full orchestra. Even today's high-tech sound systems are no match for sitting five rows back from a real orchestra pounding out the rousing theme for an action sequence. Of course, most small town folks had to settle for listening to some moonlighting night club hack and an old piano.

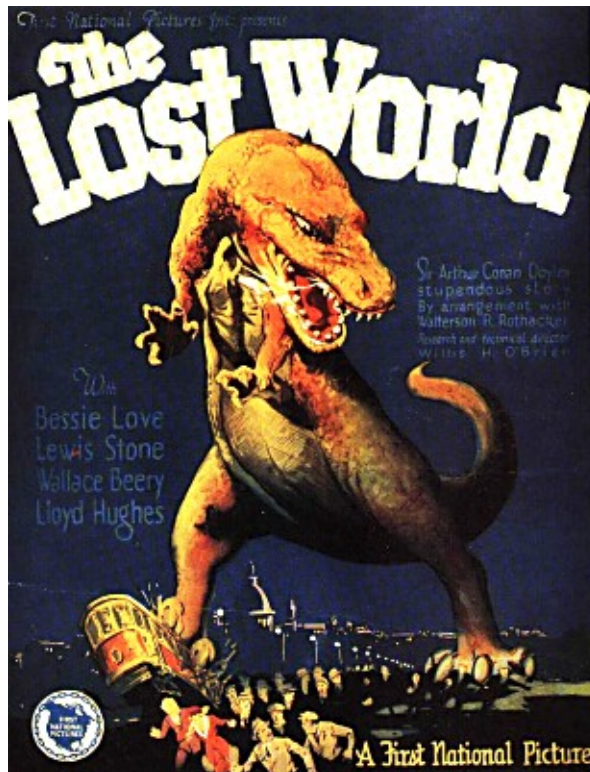
And the audiences for silent films faced no lack of choices, either. No matter how quaint and antique this cinema may seem to us, within just a few years of its invention, all the familiar film genres were born. At the silent cinema, one could see romance, drama, action, horror, science fiction, and yes, even low-budget rip-offs and tasteless sleaze. There were sequels, remakes, and spin-offs; plus embarrassing big-budget bombs and epics so huge they took an entire evening to sit through.

Then, in the 1927 version of *The Jazz Singer*, Al Jolson sang a song -- and the audience heard it. Oh, it was just a gimmick. The financially troubled Warner Brothers had seized upon the idea in a desperate attempt to lure dwindling audiences back to the theaters. And thus they started an avalanche that turned Hollywood inside out and redefined the Motion Picture art. Attending a sound picture was a wholly different experience than a silent film. For young audiences, it was like seeing movies for the first time. The old silent way of telling a story disappeared with remarkable swiftness after that.

In the rush to sound, most of the old favorites and great legends of the Silent Screen were forgotten. Sound remakes even erased the memory of the big silent hits they were based on. So in this collection of silent film titles for the Bad Cinema Diary, I make no distinctions regarding budget or quality. Anything



that was released before sound will qualify simply because of the unfortunate obscurity of silent film in general.



Silent Films listed in Chronological Order

TRAFFIC IN SOULS

(1913 - silent) dir: George Loane Tucker; w/ Jane Gail, Matt Moore, Ethel Grandia.

Being an exposé of the sordid world of white slavery, in which a heroic policeman saves his sweetheart's sister from a fate worse than death and cracks a vile kidnapping and prostitution ring operated by one of the city's most eminent men. Immigrant girls and unfortunate



waifs are abducted by bad men and forced by wicked women into a life of sin, but our young hero uses high-tech (the grandpappy of all bugging devices and a wax-cylinder phonograph) to bring the evil traffickers to their just rewards. *Ahem*. Part crime drama and part morality play with a just a teeny hint of exploitation, the script is pure silent-era schmaltz. The editing, however, is a tad abrupt & bewildering, as we bounce all over the city following the progress of many different people. And in a time before pans & dollies, the photography may at first seem clunky, but the director shows how to use a deep stage and efficient set-ups to cram a lot of story information into a static scene. A remarkably fast-paced script and plenty of exaggerated melodrama makes it actually fun to watch even for modern audiences.

the LAST DAYS OF POMPEII

(1913 - Italy - silent) dir: Mario Caserini; w/
Fernanda Negri Pouget, Eugenia Tettoni Fior, Ubaldo Stefani.

A jealous slave girl and a lustful Egyptian priest make life hell for this poor chump -- and then the mountain blows up. Mostly, this flick is a slow, schmaltzy soap opera with a tidbit of disaster tossed in at the end. It is made even slower by being told in the early cinema fashion with minimal title cards and probably relying on some familiarity with the story upon which it is based (aw, heck -- it's more fun to make up your own dialogue anyway). But this

grandpappy of disaster flicks isn't hard to follow -- it applies the same formula that disaster flicks still use today: set up the characters and their sordid conflicts, then blow everything up so the bad guys get their comeuppance and the true lovers are united at last. It's a decent flick, even though the art direction is simplistic and bound by conventions of the stage; and although they knock over enough stuff to make the disaster look good, it's not really spectacular even when judged against other films of the era. And yes, despite it being a classic of early cinema, its old-school acting and lack of dialogue cards leaves it wide open for rude jokes -- I confess I had way too much fun with that part.



BAD CINEMA DIARY

CABIRIA

(1914 - silent - Italy) writ, prod & dir: Giovanni Pastrone; w/ Lidia Quaranta, Umberto Mazzato, Bartolomeo Pagano, Italia Almirante-Manzini.

Theoretically, this historical drama centers around the adventures of a young Roman girl (Cabiria) who is flung about by disasters and wars, and also involves a Roman soldier and his beefy slave who sometimes look for her. It's a grand and sumptuously decorated epic that sprawls itself willy-nilly across the whole of the Punic Wars, with a scatter-shot script that never lights on one particular idea for very long. The title character is mere flotsam in this tale and gets precious little screen time; she seems to spend most of her life waiting to be a human sacrifice. The storytelling techniques aren't very sophisticated here, but the camera-work is quite progressive and the sets & art direction are astounding. It was very influential in its day, and is still a real fun view -- just don't let the plot give you whiplash.



20,000 LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA (1916)

(1916 - silent) dir: Stuart Paton; w/ Allen Holubar, Lois Alexander, Matt Moore, Dan Hamlon.

Gee, Captain Nemo looks just like Santa Claus... after being strung out on heroin for ten years. Despite the title this is actually a schizo splicing of 20,000 Leagues and Mysterious Island, with a third mutation involving Imperial India which the film has the chutzpah to pass off as the secret of Captain Nemo's past that "Jules Verne never told." It does have good photography, most notably genuine underwater filming. But the flick itself -- even for 1916 -- is not very well put together and the story is haphazardly told. They relied way too much on the astounding (for 1916) underwater scenes -- they spend many long minutes staring out the window at a bunch of seaweed. All hail the Fast Forward button.

the CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI (1919)

(1919 - silent, Germany) dir: Robert Wiene; w/ Werner Krauss, Conrad Veidt, Friedrich Feher.

One of the original mindgames movies -- a mad doctor controls a ghastly sleepwalker, and the town is plagued by mysterious murders. A ground-breaking film at the time, it is suffused with artistic influences. Even the title cards are expressionist, and some of the



sets are so surreal they would disorient Dali. It is an interesting film to watch and if you're not already familiar with the story, it can really throw you for a loop -- but the story moves along in extreme slow motion.

the GOLEM

(1920 - Germany - Silent) dir: Paul Wegener; w/ Albert Steinrück, Lyda Salomanova, Ernst Deutsch.

In 16th century Prague, a wizardly old Rabbi brings a clay monster to life to protect his people from persecution. But the Golem is a little more lively than the Rabbi anticipated and proves to be an even bigger menace than the persecutions. This old Jewish legend has been the inspiration for many films, but this remains the definitive version. The sets & photography are a superb sort of German noir, just bordering on expressionism, and the director's own portrayal of the monster is at

once fun and spooky. Not to get carried away with praise, I have to point out that the script is remarkably uneventful and has a rather wimpy ending; and although the Jews are our protagonists here, they are portrayed with all of their usual stereotypes intact. Nonetheless, it's a terrific film and was obviously a big influence on James Whale's *Frankenstein*.



the HAUNTED CASTLE

(1921 - Germany - Silent - aka *Schloss Vogeloed*) dir: F. W. Murnau; w/ Arnold Korff, Lulu Kyser-Korff, Lothar Mehnert, Olga Tschechowa.

When a bunch of big-wigs gather at the Baron's manor, the mystery of an old unsolved murder resurfaces -- there are threats, accusations, dark secrets, and more wretched guilty looks than a sane person can stomach. It's actually a turgid but still interesting little murder mystery. The English title is misleading -- the "haunted" part is limited to a dream sequence that is purely comical. And the rest of the comedy

relief in this flick is a clumsily wedged in annoyance. Despite what some sources say, this is certainly not an Expressionist film -- it is, rather, a surprisingly ordinary, if well made, potboiler from a director who has done infinitely better.



NOSFERATU (1922)

(1922 - Germany - Silent) dir: F. W. Murnau; w/ Max Schreck, Gustav von Wangerheim, Greta Schroeder.

An ambitious young man makes a very unwise real estate deal and an ancient vampire moves into his hometown -- and promptly proceeds to depopulate it at an alarming rate. It is an adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and although quite loose, it is also the most totally creepy adaptation ever filmed. The cinematography is years ahead of its time, and the film creates a powerful atmosphere of doom as the townsfolk carry their dead out one by one in a seemingly endless parade. I'd have to tick a few points off for Greta Schroeder's old-school stage mannerisms (she rather looked as if she were acting for someone in the next county, let alone the back row), but it hardly mars what is a true classic of cinema. It's required viewing for film students and should be on the list for any modern film fan as well.



HÄXAN

(1922 - Sweden - silent - aka *The Witch*) prod & dir: Benjamin Christensen; w/ Maren Pedersen, Clara Pontoppidan, Johs Andersen.

This purports to be a documentary on witchcraft in history, but there is little research and less real information here -- but that part is just a smoke-screen anyway. Once we get past a dreary slide show of those same old woodcuts, we get to the film's real purpose: some wildly fanciful reenactments of medieval witchery and superstition, complete with monsters, titillating semi-nudity, torture, corrupt inquisitors, loony nuns, and the devil himself (portrayed by the director with his tongue wagging all over the place). This delightfully crazy imagery is undoubtedly why the film was resurrected and recreated in 1968 under the name *Witchcraft Through the Ages*, and given some cheesy narration and a painfully overactive jazz score. Watch the silent version; it's just as much fun and not nearly as hard on the ear.



AELITA: The Queen of Mars

(1924 - USSR - silent) dir: Yakov Protazanov; w/ N. M. Tseretelli, V. I. Solnetseva.

Our hero is a Moscow radio engineer and the world's most complete dork. After receiving a mysterious radio transmission from nowhere in particular, he becomes obsessed with inventing a spaceship to take him to Mars; meanwhile, a few innocent misunderstandings cause him to believe his loving wife is being unfaithful. Eventually, he shoots his wife, runs away, builds a rocket, flies to Mars, and swoons over Aelita, Queen of Mars (who in turn swoons over her first Earth-kiss). His crewmate, however, wastes no time in fomenting a rebellion among the oppressed working class of Mars. Yow. Not that the flick goes there directly, mind you -- this thing flings off on so many obtuse tangents there were times when I wasn't sure which movie I was watching. There's moralistic tales about the dangers of bourgeois decadence, a bumbling amateur detective, and refrigerated Martians. Fortunately, there's plenty of comedy along the way -- not the least of which are those preposterous costumes. They turned some avant-garde artists loose to create truly strange sets for the Martian scenes, and the costumes they created must be the wackiest things in cinema history. It's a really screwy flick -- with really screwy clothes.



HE WHO GETS SLAPPED

(1924 - silent) dir: Victor Seastrom; w/ Lon Chaney, Norma Shearer, John Gilbert; from a play by Leonid Andreyev.

Chaney gives a wickedly expressive performance as a scientist driven mad when both his life's work and his wife are stolen. In his despondency, he becomes a clown -- until one day when fate gives him a chance for an insane revenge. Almost surreal in spots, this is a short, intense, and moody piece...sort of what you'd expect from a Russian playwright.



the LOST WORLD

(1925 - silent) dir: Harry O. Hoyt; w/ Wallace Beery, Bessie Love, Lewis Stone, Lloyd Hughes. Based on the novel by Arthur Conan Doyle.

An expedition to the Amazon uncovers a hidden world of living dinosaurs, so they bring back a



brontosaurus so it can get loose and stomp around London a bit. The original version also had a strong romance angle, but the final cut trimmed that subplot so much, the little that remains just looks hopelessly corny. Willis O'Brien's stop-motion dinosaurs were not only the best in their day, they would still have looked decent in the 1950's. The film is fun, if a little too tightly edited, but it contains what must be one of the biggest bonehead script bloopers of all time. You see, the dinos are atop this huge, unscalable plateau -- the only way to get up there is to climb a nearby chimney of rock and fell the only tree at its top to form a bridge across the chasm 'tween the chimney & the plateau. Well, everyone gets across okay, but then a bumbling bronto knocks down their tree bridge. "Oh, horrors!" they wail, for now they are trapped atop the terrible plateau! Apparently they never notice the whole forest full of big trees that surrounds them on their side of the chasm.

the MONSTER

(1925 - silent) dir: Roland West; w/ Lon Chaney, Johnny Arthur.

A hick town is plagued by strange disappearances and the local nerd with the correspondence course detective diploma tracks the strange doings to the loony bin -- a mad doctor is amuck, and the former patients are his henchmen. It is superbly filmed and has some great moments, but it is really a cutesy comedy that can try the patience sometimes. Still, it's worth a look for fans of Chaney or if you're in the mood for a sappy comedy/horror/romance.

PHANTOM OF THE OPERA (1925)

(1925) dir: Rupert Julian; w/ Lon Chaney, Mary Philbin, Norman Kerry.

Despite its age and the poor quality of the surviving prints, this is still the most effective screen version of the story that I have seen. It has some nice comic relief (particularly the flitting flock of little ballerinas), good tension and not a little sexual innuendo. It also has some of the most memorable visuals in any black & white horror flick. It may sound clichéd, but this really is on the "must see" list for any film fan.



'Feast your eyes —
glut your soul, on my
accursed ugliness!'

the ADVENTURES OF PRINCE ACHMED

(1926 - Germany - silent, tinted) created by Lotte Reiniger.

Adapted from the Arabian Nights, the evil sorcerer puts the brave prince through his paces. The world's first feature-length animated film was done with paper silhouettes and stop-motion animation. The script is necessarily sparse, of course, and I actually found it rather sleepy in spots. However, it is a gorgeous looking film with some brilliant moments and is certainly worth a view.



the MAGICIAN

(1926 - silent) dir: Rex Ingram; w/ Margaret Perry, Paul Wegener, Ivan Petrovich; based on a W. S. Maugham story.

An evil occultist with menacing eyebrows hypnotizes a young lady to be his bride... and his eventual human sacrifice in his mad experiments to create artificial life. The only print of this I've seen was so badly decayed it was like watching a freakin' shadow play. But from what little I could see, it appears to have been shot very well, with great sets and some good location photography. The plot itself is a rather pedestrian melodrama, but we finally get to the wizard's tower, the dwarfish henchman, and the fuming, sparking climactic laboratory scene. The similarities are so many, it is impossible to conclude that all of this was an inspiration for the same scene in Whale's *Frankenstein*. However, unless a better print is recovered, this will remain only a historical curiosity.



LONDON AFTER MIDNIGHT

(1927 - silent) dir: Tod Browning; w/ Lon Chaney, Marceline Day, Conrad Nagel.

After the death of a neighbor, the empty house next door is reoccupied by a ghostly presence that may be a vampire. But the stuffy investigator who declared the first death a suicide seems intent on blaming the living for the recent troubles. A combination horror story/murder mystery that comes to a rather abrupt and surprising end. But exactly how good the movie



is, is hard to say -- no one's seen it in decades. The last known print was destroyed in a fire in the 1960's and we can only see it now in a recreation made from the script, title cards, and still photographs taken on the set. The film was remade in the sound era under the title *Mark of the Vampire*.

METROPOLIS

(1927 - Germany - silent) dir: Fritz Lang; w/ Brigitte Helm, Alfred Abel, Gustave Fröhlich, Rudolf Klein-Rogge.

In the future city of Metropolis, the elite ruling class live in pampered luxury in buildings stretching to the clouds. All the labor and power is supplied by the oppressed masses who slave in the darkness below the ground. An embittered inventor has finally created the perfect artificial person, and the ruler of Metropolis wants to use that to destroy the spirit of the grumbling workers -- but the inventor has his own plans and uses his simulacrum to stir up both rebellion in the depths and foolish revelry above. Meanwhile, the ruler's own son struggles to form a bridge between the two societies -- but can he do that before they destroy each other? Okay, no apologies -- this is not only one of my favorite movies, but I think it just might be the finest movie ever made. It's a beautifully visionary epic tale of love, loyalty, and social consciousness. Now available in a new reconstruction from Kino Video, it is the most complete version of the film available since 1927. The film has been beautifully remastered, and even the original script and score have been restored. At long last, we have a proper presentation of one of the true crown jewels of cinematic art.



the UNKNOWN

(1927 - silent) story & dir: Tod Browning; w/ Lon Chaney, Joan Crawford, Norman Kerry.

Chaney plays an armless circus freak who throws knives with his feet and has way more than his share of dirty little secrets. When he tries to win the heart of a mentally unstable gypsy girl who the Strong Man is also wooing, we get a wicked little melodrama involving murder, jealousy, and unnatural surgery. Like some of Browning's other projects, nobody today would have the guts to do a story like this.



WEST OF ZANZIBAR

(1928 - Silent) dir: Tod Browning; w/ Lon Chaney, Lionel Barrymore, Mary Nolan.

A crippled stage magician takes his tricks to Africa and plots a long and wicked revenge against the man who stole his wife and broke his back. Of course, things are not at all as they seem, and wickedness begets wickedness. This is a very polished production with excellent photography and a superb performance from Chaney. It's a good deal less nasty than the sound remake (*Kongo*), but makes up for it with class and a great cast. Released at the tail end of the silent era, this one went to theaters with synchronized music and sound effects, but no talking.



WOMAN IN THE MOON

(1929 - Germany - silent) dir: Fritz Lang; w/ Willy Fritsch, Gerda Maurus, Klaus Pohl, Fritz Rasp.

There's gold in them thar hills -- the hills of the Moon, that is. And that's why the first space program gets hijacked by a global conspiracy of the top financiers. The screenwriter of *Metropolis* gives us a script that's a three-ring circus of industrial espionage, crackpot scientists, blackmail, love triangles, greed, murder, jealousy, and blind panic! The film is hampered a bit by scenes that go on way too long and great gooey-sticky dollops of eye-bulging melodrama -- but the whole thing is so fun to watch it's hard to complain much. It is beautifully photographed, superbly performed, and sports special effects decades ahead of its time. Some of the space "science" here is astoundingly prophetic -- while some of it is laughably naïve; they touch down on the moon with all the delicacy of an artillery shell and the ship's control panel has ergonomics so atrocious you'd think the most valuable crew member would be a chiropractor. It's a delightful flick in more ways than one.





A few more Silent Films can be seen on the pages devoted to Jekyll & Hyde, Race Pictures, and Tarzan.

The Bad Cinema Diary™ - 6th edition July 2009

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Icon Glossary:



Good Stinker -- These are the films where a good deal of the entertainment comes from filmmaking incompetence; fun to watch in spite of themselves.



Goopy Gore -- These films exhibit distinctly above-normal quantities of unpleasantly abused body parts.



Naughty Nudie -- Films with this flag feature frequent and/or explicit nudity (almost always female) beyond that normally found in your average T&A flick.



Butt Stompin' -- These films feature at least one superior violent fight or shootout scene that will get the testosterone pumping.



Gold Star -- These are the flicks that I felt reached above their expectations or at least pleasantly surprised me; they may not always be actually good flicks, but I did find something in them worthwhile.



Blue Max Medal of Really Goodness -- These are flicks that I not only enjoyed, but I think are actually quite good films (not always the same thing).



Lethal Cinema -- These wretched viewing experiences go beyond being merely bad to become genuine sources of pain and regret; they should be avoided by all but the most masochistic trash cinema veterans. Don't say I didn't warn you.