

AN UNEXPECTED RECEPTION: LYRICAL NITRATE BETWEEN FILM HISTORY AND ART

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Once my film *Lyrisch Nitraat* (Lyrical Nitrate), after intensive editing, was ready in the summer of 1990, producer Suzanne van voorst and I discussed where we would most like to hold the premiere. I had a strong preference for Pordenone's Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, the silent film festival in northern Italy. Suzanne would have chosen for the International Film Festival Rotterdam, but she understood my reasons.

"Pordenone," as the festival is known among insiders, was the only festival in the world entirely dedicated to silent films, and had been so for ten years. Beyond the walls of the cinematheques, which at the time mainly showed the all too familiar canon of the silent era, the festival organizers were doing pioneering work. Directors, genres, and films were rescued from obscurity with an almost religious fervor. *Lyrical Nitrate* was meant as an homage to the early silent film – where would we find a better context for our film?

The premiere Pordenone accorded us in October 1990 did not produce the triumph I had secretly hoped for. The film was programmed, not to say buried, at a late hour, and ultimately screened even later, much later than indicated in the – notoriously crammed – programme schedule. When it ended (around midnight) there was modest applause from the barely half-filled auditorium, and there was even some feverish booing from a small group of Dutch film historians. They used the premiere to express their discontent about the policy of the Netherlands

Filmmuseum. *Lyrical Nitrate* was proof that its new staff – of which I was a member – was squandering its collection on newfangled and cheap popularization.

It was the sort of premiere best kept out of the public record, especially when the festivals of Rotterdam (IFFR) and Berlin (Berlinale/Forum) embraced the film. Forum, which enjoyed great prestige in arthouse circles and had always delighted in snatching films away from the IFFR, agreed to screenings in Rotterdam, as long as they were presented merely as a national premiere. Berlin claimed the international premiere – we felt it wise to keep our mouths shut about Pordenone. Google did not exist then.

In Rotterdam as well as in Berlin, *Lyrical Nitrate* was presented as an homage to the silent film, but a perceptible and startling shift had taken place. The film was essentially programmed as a melancholic cinematic poem about the transience of film material, musings about a lost world and the patina that clings to old works of art. It was also presented as an exponent of a film genre that had experienced a revival, beginning in the mid-1980s, the “found footage film.” Whereas this had initially been the specialty of visual artists, it had now been discovered by filmmakers as well, who unleashed “recycling” and “sampling” on “found” strips of film. *Lyrical Nitrate* was not a film by a film historian, but by an artist.

I was left confused. I may have been a filmmaker with strong artistic impulses, but my original intention with *Lyrical Nitrate* had been to make a film history documentary, not a found footage film. Now, twenty years later, I look back with amusement on that hectic period. Naivety is usually not a recommendation, and it certainly should not serve as a shield to hide behind, but in my candour I truly believed I had created a mainly informative film in *Lyrical Nitrate*, which would be received precisely and particularly by film historians and representatives of film archives as a promotional advertisement for the products of the early era of cinema. In the end, the film has achieved that status, but in the early 1990s, this seemed far from assured.

To the extent that historiography is capable of providing any sort of clarification, I would like to attempt here to elucidate the reasons behind this unexpected reception. This is not only my own personal history, but also that of the

Netherlands Filmmuseum in the 1990s.

My cinephile fascination for early silent films was awakened in the mid-1980s. An important factor in this was the discovery that the Netherlands Filmmuseum possessed an amazing treasure trove of such films, the Desmet Collection, now listed on the UNESCO World Heritage Register but barely known at the time. This collection held about 900 films dating from 1907 to 1916, the legacy of cinema owner and film distributor Jean Desmet, which had been entrusted to the Netherlands Filmmuseum in the late 1950s. The results of the first preservation efforts were released in small doses and given coverage in *Skrien*, a film periodical where I was an editor for many years.

One of the most startling aspects of these preserved films was that they were in color. Like many cinephiles at the time, I had assumed that silent films were shot in black and white. This was suddenly shown not to be the case: most silent films featured monochrome colors, produced by tinting and toning. It completely changed the perception of these films.

I also became fascinated by the importance of music for silent films. In the early 1980s, there had been a great deal of experimentation with musical accompaniment, including at Pordenone. A festival in Frankfurt had revealed to me how silent films accompanied by a symphony orchestra or a pianist come to life. This seems self-evident today, but at the renowned Cinémathèque Française, at the time still regarded as the valhalla of film lovers, silent films were still being shown, out of a misplaced purism, without music. Musical accompaniment needed to be reinvented.

Color and music brought me into an area of film history about which little was known. I conceived the plan to make a documentary about this, using the Desmet Collection as a starting point. Although I had seen only about thirty films out of this collection, I suspected that, like an archaeologist, I would unearth a genuine treasure.

Film archives are not particularly known for their great openness. Yet the director at the time, Frans Maks, was not ill-disposed toward my plans. As a relative outsider in the world of film archives, he had recognized the importance of preservation in color. A film about this fit in with his efforts to find funding for such

preservation. Before we could flesh out the film project, however, the then Ministry of Culture installed a new administration. The latter had grand plans for the sleepy Filmmuseum, which left no place for Maks.

Hoos Blotkamp became the new director. She brought Eric de Kuyper to Amsterdam from Nijmegen, where he was teaching semiotics and film history, as her deputy. De Kuyper was my great inspiration and mentor, not just as an academic, but also as a filmmaker. We knew each other well. My film's prospects seemed secure.

Hoos Blotkamp, it turned out, had other ideas. She was so appalled by the huge backlog in the preservation of the film collection – the films were literally rotting away in the storage depots – that she was not at all in favor of inviting a filmmaker in. All hands on deck – that was her motto. First put things in order, then start making films. She asked me to wait at least a year and come back later. “Access” is the secret to any documentary. I had no access. My film plan seemed doomed to die a quiet death.

A few months later I met with Blotkamp again. She asked whether I wanted to come work for her and De Kuyper. Organizing the Filmmuseum's chaotic collection had become a matter of urgency. Films desperately needed to be preserved, but which ones? The material brought up from the cellars turned out to be unknown, and scarcely traceable to the canon of cinema history. Choices had to be made, and the film history resources available at the time were of little help (something that has been remedied at an unprecedented pace in recent decades).

“Nitrate can't wait” was an oftheard maxim at the time, and the museum was sitting on a mountain of this ancient, perishable film stock. Nitrate film that was not copied to modern film stock would be irretrievably lost. Blotkamp had been trained as an art historian and had worked as a curator at the Centraalmuseum in Utrecht. Taste played a major role in her thinking about collections. Since it was financially impossible to preserve everything, preservation was a method of establishing a collection, she realized.

So I was not recruited as a film historian (which I wasn't), but because of my “taste,” to outline, with De Kuyper, an initial framework for establishing a collection

out of the material that had yet to be preserved. As with the screenings of silent films without music, the Cinémathèque Française was the example not to follow. The famous institution, it turned out, let external committees make preservation decisions by consulting long lists of films. On paper! To be unknown was to be unloved. Seeing a film before reaching a decision was not standard preservation practice at the time.

Those first months in the film archives, hidden away in a dune park near Overveen, miles outside Amsterdam, are unquestionably among the most emotional in my film-related life. Pallets filled with rusty film canisters were brought out, some of which had not been opened in fifty to eighty years. Every canister harbored a surprise.

It was as though I was being pulled into all these longunseen images. I looked into the eyes of forgotten glassblowers, sailors, and boxing champions. I meandered with steam locomotives through the Alps and with flatboats over the Ardèche. I tumbled off bridges or balconies with crazy ladies (usually men in women's clothing), or lost myself in the melodramatic intrigues of an Italian diva.

It was all so different, so far away. I was living that wonderful opening line from L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." In those first few months in the film archives, the seed of a profoundly felt melancholy must have been planted, an awareness of loss, film as a struggle against the irrevocable passing of a bygone era, brought back to life in the film projector.

I viewed the films on a viewing table I had to operate by hand. I was literally bringing the images to life myself; I was connected to them by my own body. What's more, I could figure out the cameraman's shooting speed. All of these films, after all, had been shot with handcranked cameras. There was no set speed: it could vary from 12 to 22 frames per second. It was crucial to approximate the original shooting speed. In so doing, you not only did justice to the desired technical quality, but also to the emotional significance encapsulated in the images.

In the original film plan for *Lyrical Nitrate*, written up before I had ever set foot inside a film archive, I had already emphasized the importance of showing silent

films at the correct speed, but only when I had to figure out this speed with my own hands on the viewing table did I understand its possibilities. It was not a matter of a correct average of eighteen frames per second, for instance (a frequently applied standard in cinemathèque projection booths), but of the precise speed for each scene, or even for each shot. When I eventually cut *Lyrical Nitrate* with editor Menno Boerema, we not only tried to find the right speed for each shot, we also took pleasure in varying it within shots. With great precision we endeavored to manipulate the emotional power of the images, by speeding up or slowing down the shots.

It is by no means certain that in doing so we approximated the historical practice of film screenings during the first thirty years of the cinema. Film may have been a hand operated medium, but the kind of game we played with it had probably been, in the projection booths of most cinemas, more a matter of accident and lack of interest than conscious manipulation. It was not for nothing that American film studios embraced films with sound. These could only be shown at a standard and therefore motorized speed (set at 24 frames per second). Moreover, the optical sound strip was attached to the image strip: cutting into the image had dire consequences for the sound. Shots or scenes could no longer be freely cut out or shortened by projectionists. Sound gave filmmakers the assurance that their films would finally be shown as they had been intended.

Lyrical Nitrate was not so much the historical reconstruction I had believed it to be, but more a romantic exploration, not to say exploitation, of what the original filmmakers probably perceived as a flaw of the technology: the handcranking of the images. As on the viewing table at the archives, I manipulated the images. I was obsessed by the idea of underscoring their emotional content; I believed in the didactics of the pointer.

Film historians like those who gathered at Pordenone must have found this odd. They were not seeking an emotional magnification of their subject. Here was someone playing with material they themselves had to go to great lengths to be able to view at all. It must have nettled them that I evidently had access to material that was in need of their research. They had been looking forward for years to the day

when they would finally get to see more and unknown films from the closed bastions of the archives, so that they could verify and, if need be, adjust the assumptions of film historiography.

But what did *Lyrical Nitrate* mean to the closed bastions of the film archives? The day after the premiere in Pordenone I had a conversation with the evercongenial film historian and curator of the Cinémathèque Française, Vincent Pinel. He had nice things to say about *Lyrical Nitrate*. “But,” he said, “those of us in archives should be ashamed of this film. It shows what’s gone wrong. It shows that we didn’t save the nitrate in time.”

Pinel was referring to the closing sequence of *Lyrical Nitrate*, which shows strips of film in which the image has been eaten away. Nitrate, used for film stock until about 1953, was the film archives’ greatest enemy. It has the unpleasant characteristic of devouring itself over time. Poor storage conditions can accelerate this process, but however carefully nitrate film is stored, eventually the images will disappear, turning first into a slimy substance and finally disintegrating into a handful of powdery residue.

The archives were living on a ticking time bomb, and they had not succeeded in making the seriousness of this sufficiently clear to the world, as Pinel knew in 1990. And here was a film that had the gall to present the deterioration of nitrate as a form of beauty. Admittedly a horrifying beauty, in a certain sense an exponent of the sublime, but at the same time also the failings of the art of archival storage.

I knew what he was talking about. Every time I opened one of those rusty film canisters my heart would pound with apprehension. You never knew what horror would be revealed. Just once too often I had struggled to pull apart sticky rolls of nitrate film. I can still recall the sound quite clearly: it was like pulling apart a roll of Scotch tape that has sat in the sun too long. The images would literally dissolve into thin air. Yet I would try to guide these rolls across my viewing table, for there was an odd magic emanating from these images that looked as though they had been scorched with a flamethrower. What could still be glimpsed in these blotches looked like hell, but a hell with a beauty of its own, the unbearable beauty of perdition.

The closing sequence of *Lyrical Nitrate* would never have ended up in the film

if I had not worked at the film archives. It also contained the only images that did not come from the Desmet Collection. As a curator, I viewed more films in that period than just those from that collection. This was a film canister whose smell made me suspect the worst even before I opened it. It was even worse than I had feared, but still I attempted to get an idea of what had once been visible in that stinking goo.

I saw Paradise, where a scantily clad Eve is tempted to eat an apple by the satanic serpent, watched angrily by God himself, who literally holds a spinning Earth in his hands. As simple as it sounds now, I really had to squint to distinguish this through the devouring nitrate blotches. The deterioration had also given everything a deep orange hue, and the blotches moved rhythmically, in a way Stan Brakhage would have enjoyed.

It was, of course, a small miracle that the decomposition of the nitrate had affected images of the earthly paradise, in which the Fall of Man represented innocence lost for all eternity. I put the roll back in its canister and put it aside. It was in too bad a condition to preserve, and the rest of the film (*Warfare of the Flesh*, by director Edward Warren, 1917) did not provide much justification for this anyway. But I knew I had the ending of Lyrical Nitrate, should I ever get to make that film.

Memories always sound simple in hind sight – they have become a story. I wanted to show the perishable nitrate in all its glory as a warning: “Just look at what is going to be lost.” But I was also enchanted by its beauty, the seductive power of the ruin, in which decay conjures up an allure of its own. This latter impulse perhaps did make me more an artist than a film archivist.

The paradox in this story is that what began as an informative film about the early cinema morphed, precisely because of my work at the film archives, into a lyrical found footage poem about loss and the futility of memory. The emotional journey I had gone through during those first few months at the archives contaminated my historical standpoints. The intended informative film became a psalm.

Hoos Blotkamp eventually gave me free rein to make the film, as long as I

promised to use already preserved material only, which I did. The little roll from *Warfare of the Flesh* is the only thing we had preserved specifically for the documentary. The technicians at Haghefilm, the Filmmuseum's regular laboratory, who usually managed to perform miracles, accepted the stinking roll of film with extreme reluctance. How they got it through the copying machine is still a mystery to me, but eventually we duly received the blotches on celluloid in a spotless canister.

And so it became the closing sequence of *Lyrical Nitrate*, in which it still serves a dual function. It is a warning about the deterioration of the nitrate, a call for the rescue of the last nitrate films. And it is a rapturous feast for the eyes, which drink in the beauty of ruin.

To film historians and film archives the warning was not a revelation. And an ode to the beauty of decay, at a time when "nitrate couldn't wait," was at the very least incongruous, not to say slightly perverse. To me, however, the two were naturally linked. As they were to an audience that knew nothing about silent film or about nitrate and the struggle of the film archives against decay. *Lyrical Nitrate* worked as an eyeopener. Proof, perhaps, that only paradoxes can reveal truths.

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