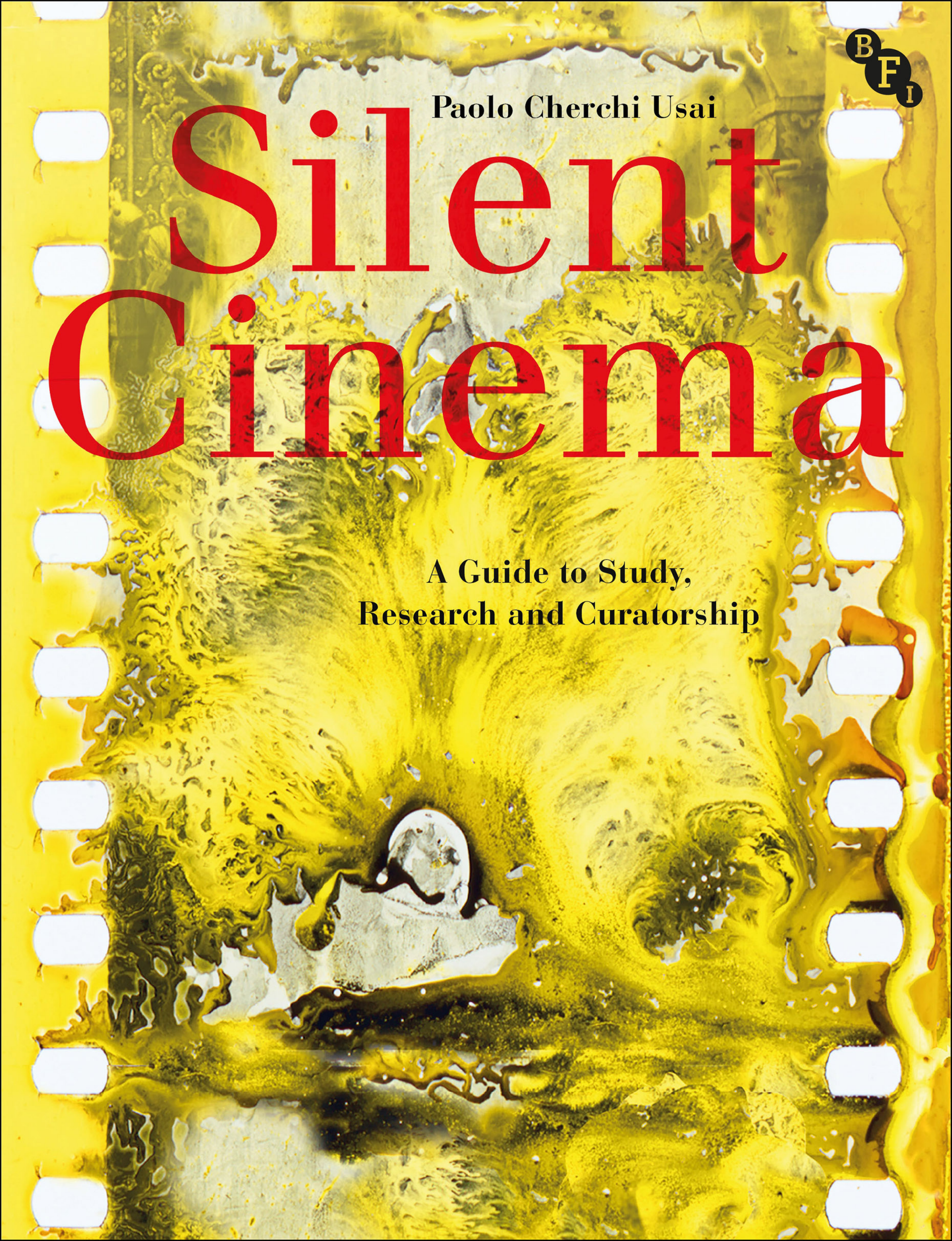




Paolo Cherchi Usai

# Silent Cinema

A Guide to Study,  
Research and Curatorship



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*The Vampire* (Robert G. Vignola, 1913). Gelatin silver print. Source: George Eastman Museum.

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## A Guide to Study, Research and Curatorship

Third Edition

Paolo Cherchi Usai



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IN MEMORY OF  
ANGELO RAJA HUMOUDA (1937–1994),  
A PALESTINIAN REFUGEE IN ITALY,  
FOUNDER OF THE CINETECA D.W. GRIFFITH,  
A POLITICAL ACTIVIST  
FOR THE UNITED STATES OF EUROPE.  
  
MY FIRST TEACHER OF FILM HISTORY.



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# Preface to the Third Edition

There is a good chance that most readers of this book are 'born digital'. The first films they saw on a large screen were probably made and exhibited in a medium of little or no resemblance to the one used in motion picture theatres during the twentieth century. Many of these actual or potential lovers of cinema never held in their hands a strip of positive film, let alone a negative. To a large extent, this guide to the study of silent cinema has been expressly written for them. When its first edition appeared in 1991, I had just begun to be familiar with a relatively young scholarly discipline. The list of unanswered questions I was compiling for my own reference was already quite long, and it kept growing at an exponential rate. I was very inexperienced, too, but so enthralled about the topic that I decided to give my book a suitably alluring title, *Burning Passions: An Introduction to the Study of Silent Cinema*.

By the time a revised and expanded edition of the manual appeared in 2000 under the more conventional but slightly misleading title *Silent Cinema. An Introduction*, what once was a remote frontier in academic film studies had turned into a blossoming research field. Back in 1987, a multinational bibliography on early cinema edited by Emmanuelle Toulet and further enlarged by Elena Dagrada listed 181 scholarly books and articles published between 1949 and 1978, an average of six works per year; from 1979 to 1994, their number soared to 1,313, corresponding to seven new studies produced each month. The trend was echoed by the rediscovery of the first thirty years of cinema in collecting institutions. Fewer than

two thousand silent feature films were known to survive in 1962; fifteen years later, the figure had already risen to almost six thousand titles.

Satisfying as it may have been, this harvest of prints and information was nothing compared to the avalanche of silent films and related documents that came back to light in the following decades. More than fifty thousand features and shorts produced from 1894 to 1929 are currently extant, and the rediscovery process is far from over. In 1999, one could keep track of what was being written on the history of silent cinema in at least three or four languages; this is now a distant mirage, so many are the monographs, essays, and doctoral dissertations that are pouring from scholarly research undertaken in all continents. Getting to know them all has become a formidable goal. Another sign of the changing times is the further subdivision of the 'silent cinema' period into narrower chronological segments.

There is an international association for the study of early cinema, Domitor, whose declared agenda rarely ventures beyond films made after 1915; some members of the group are convinced that film production in the years 1894–1900 will keep them busy for a lifetime. Faced with this cornucopia of expertise, learning the basics of how to study silent cinema can be a daunting task without some preliminary guidance. Today's students have one great advantage over their predecessors, in that so many more silent films are accessible for viewing than ever before, but the embarrassment of riches comes at the cost of not

necessarily knowing what to look for, other than the usual suspects: Chaplin, *Metropolis*, Méliès, the cinematic pantheon codified by textbooks and popular encyclopedias or websites.

I have no desire nor the inclination to suggest which silent films should be seen first, as I believe that a normative approach would inevitably kill at the outset any curiosity or pleasure to explore the amazing visions offered by cinema in its formative years. What this new incarnation of the book attempts to do instead is to stimulate an interest in how these visions were created, who were the people who made and enjoyed them, where did they manufacture and share them with others, what were the machines used to achieve their projects, and why were these visions embedded in long, fragile, and often flammable rolls of perforated celluloid. I had originally conceived this work as an expression of my dual belief that there is no better way to engage with an unknown culture than blending with it, and that it is important to do so in that culture's own terms. I did my best to remain faithful to these principles in the pages that follow. For this very reason, writings from the silent film era represent a significant portion of the bibliography. As in previous editions, textual and audiovisual resources – listed at the end of the volume with page references for each section – are provided in lieu of what would have otherwise loaded the text with a massive set of endnotes.

This guide is structured into three intertwined strands: a summary of concepts (what silent cinema was during its commercial life); a research tool (how it can be studied and preserved); a theoretical discussion (why it matters as an expression of culture). After a 'digital' prologue, the first part of the book (a preliminary orientation, organized by topic) describes how films were made, exhibited, and seen during the silent era; the second half – addressed to those who are

interested in delving further into the subject – explains why they look so different today, and what sense can be made of the discrepancies. The moment when silent cinema ceased to be a form of mass entertainment and turned into an object of recollection and rediscovery (it happened around 1929, when silent films were still being shown in many countries on a regular basis) is the watershed connecting one episode to the next. Like separate reels of one and the same projection print, all of its segments belong to a single narrative journey, and should be viewed as a continuum. Their unifying theme is the ongoing transformation of cinema over time. Its origin, emergence, flourishing, and precipitous demise; its destruction, survival, copying, reassembly, and eventual migration into other types of visual experience (back to the 'digital' frame story) are all expressions of highly complex, mutable, often contradictory approaches to history.

Preserving film is perhaps the most tangible proof of our ambiguous relationship with the notion of posterity as applied to the motion picture. My goal in this respect is to make it more transparent by showing that silent cinema was primarily a performing art – with or without live music – and that it is still possible to admire it as such, regardless of its material or immaterial reincarnation as cultural heritage. Listening to Bach's cantatas in recorded form never prevented music lovers from doing the same in a concert hall, when feasible. There is nothing wrong with silent cinema duplicates, either, insofar as they encourage the freedom to choose between the migration and the performance.

The emphasis on the chemistry, mechanics, showmanship, and material evidence of the film, both as a source of history and as an object of empirical analysis, is my way of tackling the question of viewers' rights in strategic terms. The appearance of this volume coincides with the near extinction

of analogue film formats, an event announced for many years already. The extinction, however, has not yet occurred. At the time of this writing, various types of photochemical stock are still being produced, albeit in very small quantities. There are filmmakers who are using it. There are places where it is exhibited. If this continues to happen, explaining how cinema was initially crafted may contribute to its renaissance. Conversely, if (or when) the end comes, there may be some value in offering an introductory account of early film technology and presentation, either as an archaeological trace or – more optimistically – as the blueprint for potential rebirth. Other art forms have been resurrected this way, centuries after their demise. There is no reason why cinema should be excluded from this possibility. Either way, I find this message in a bottle worth delivering.

Revising a book on a periodical basis can be a tedious, often unrewarding chore. I had done so twice already with this one, and I was determined that it should not happen again. Faced with the unappealing prospect of yet another instalment, I found the perfect excuse for rewriting the text almost in its entirety, in the realization that so much has changed in what we know about silent cinema since the latest edition of this volume went to press almost twenty years ago. Having more silent films to watch is a wonderful thing, as long as it is not taken for granted that we are also seeing them better than before. To illustrate my point I have chosen Georges Méliès' canonical masterwork *A Trip to the Moon* to accompany the reader in the itinerary from the dawn of silent cinema through its fleeting heyday, its precipitous demise and near extinction, its revival in film museums, specialist and mainstream festivals, academic studies, the creation of new silent films

with vintage equipment (such as the Wisconsin Biograph 35mm shorts, made in 1999 with a 1907 camera) and commercial or amateur digital formats. 'Archival cinema' and 'new silent cinema' are now film genres in their own right, fertile grounds for experiments by artists who borrowed, reassembled, and reshaped images from silent films to create alternative views of our world.

Describing this entire trajectory on a worldwide scale in a single volume required a draconian selection from the mass of evidence at our disposal, both in film scholarship and in film preservation. Aware as I am of my own limitations in being able to keep up with the burgeoning literature on the subject, I feel fortunate for the very generous help from friends and colleagues of various nationalities who were kind enough to show me in translated form the main contents of books and essays written in languages I do not know; their names and institutions are listed separately in this volume. I take, of course, full responsibility for all the errors and omissions I may have incurred; my apologies are directed in particular to specialists in specific areas of silent cinema, as they will find here only a very tiny part of what they have uncovered in the course of their studies. For the sake of synthesis, I also had to take many shortcuts by greatly simplifying concepts that I know would have deserved much longer explanations. Sacrificing detail to clarity is, I think, an acceptable price to pay in a book for committed beginners.

A book lives for as long as it fosters constructive debate. I am keen to be part of it, and to learn from other participants. Please send your suggestions, proposed amendments, and opinions to [p.cherchiusai@gmail.com](mailto:p.cherchiusai@gmail.com).

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# About the Author

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(Austrian Filmmuseum, 2008), co-authored with David Francis, Alexander Horwath, and Michael Loebenstein, and *La storia del cinema in 1000 parole* (Il Castoro, 2012). He established in 2015 the Nitrate Picture Show, the world's first Festival of Film Conservation. A resident curator of the Telluride Film Festival, he directed the silent feature films *Passio* (2007), based on his book *The Death of Cinema* (BFI, 2001), with music by Arvo Pärt, and *Picture* (2015), from an original score by the Alloy Orchestra.

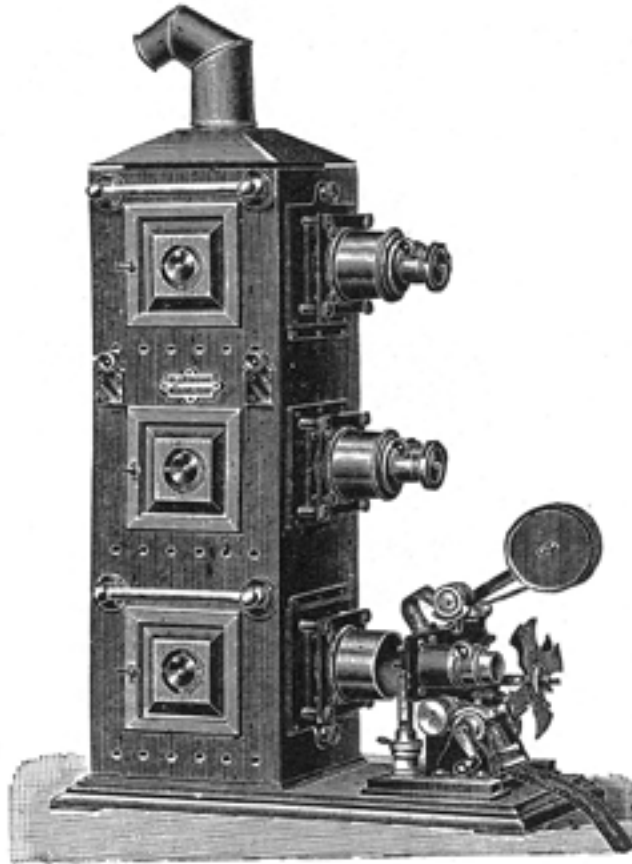
# Note

Film titles are given in their original language, followed by the English release title (if known), the name of the director or production company, and

the year of first release. Archival titles of unidentified films, and literal translations of films not released in English language, appear between square brackets.



# Introduction



**Fig. 1** Multi-rack magic lantern with film projector. Eduard Liesegang oHG, Germany, c. 1900. Source: F. Paul Liesegang, *Handbuch der praktischen Kinematographie*. Leipzig: Edition Liesegang's Verlag, 1908, p. 233.

From 1889 onwards, people around the world were involved as cinematographers, artists, scientists, technicians, entrepreneurs, and audiences in the manufacture, creation, and exhibition of motion pictures seen through a strip of celluloid, either on machines for individual viewing or on

a large screen. Born in France and the United States at about the same time, this invention quickly caught the curiosity of the public, soon becoming a phenomenon of vast cultural and economic proportions. Moving images were not revolutionary per se: they had been made and

experienced for a very long time in the form of shadows cast against hard surfaces or sheets of woven fabric, then by the use of optical devices aimed at producing an illusion of movement. Wayang, a theatrical performance where puppets or human dancers created dynamic silhouettes between a light source and a screen, was imported no later than the first century AD to South-East Asia from either China (yǐng xì), or India, or both areas of the continent. The magic lantern, born in the seventeenth century, is the first known technique for projecting still or animated images in a dark room, through a painted sheet of glass and a lens; remote precursors of this device came from Turkey, Iran, and Central Asia. Many other systems followed, all endowed with the same power of evoking visions of real or imaginary worlds.

The technology devised in the 1890s took a further, decisive step in yet another direction. Its artificial dreams were brought to light by a semi-automatic or automatic machine, activated by a crank that was similar to those employed in some manually operated musical instruments. The resulting effect was a spectacle of unprecedented realism, complexity, and emotional appeal. This novelty was largely indebted to the invention of photography in the early nineteenth century, but two other innovations made it look different from all its ancestors: first, a semi-transparent and flexible strip containing a great number of sequential images; second, a mechanism designed to move the image carrier between a light source and a lens at regular intervals. These inventions were merged around 1894–5 into a single entity, variously referred to with terms such as ‘animated views’ or ‘motion pictures.’ Some linguistic groups found the words inadequate to describe this kind of visual experience: in Urdu, for instance, the preference was for ‘shabistan’, whose literal translation is ‘kingdom of the shadows.’ After some discussion, Louis and Auguste Lumière decided to call their equipment ‘Cinématographe’; the name, and the product associated with it,

became so popular that an abbreviated version of the word became identified with the medium as a whole, despite the stubborn resistance of Lumière’s competitors in the English-speaking world.

A byproduct of the Industrial Revolution, cinema was initially promoted as an optical marvel. In later years, this claim was updated through the attempts to find elements of specificity in the new mode of expression. Inevitable as it was, the independence war against the other arts – stage theatre in particular – was a collective exercise in wishful thinking. The only specific feature of cinema was that it functioned as a cultural digest of its time, the point of convergence for many other forms of expression. Pantomime, circus, variety shows, *tableaux vivants*, literature, academic paintings, photographs, magic lantern slides, postcards, advertising, travel lectures, caricature, journalism, science, fashion, and the applied arts, not to mention music, were all part of cinema’s genetic code. It was also called ‘photodrama’ and ‘photoplay’, among many other designations, not at all ‘silent cinema’, although the word ‘silence’ was sometimes mentioned as a point of distinction. Aesthetic concerns of a higher profile were frequently debated, but this occurred almost exclusively among the intellectual élites of the period. When ‘sound on film’ entered the scene, it wasn’t a complete surprise, either. Music had been heard countless times in motion picture theatres, either live or through phonograph players and other mechanical instruments; spoken words, too, as well as noises deliberately made for the screen. The true revolution was, again, of mimetic nature. Recorded soundtracks took cinema another step closer to the so-called ‘real’ world; its fictional representation was ‘all talking, all singing’, as it was promoted worldwide in the late 1920s, not unlike the songs and the speeches that had been heard in theatres for the past two decades, only more accurately so. Television was also on the horizon: the first recorded transmission of an image in motion dates from 1926.

In purely empirical terms, it is arbitrary to divide the history of cinema into a 'silent' and a 'sound' era. The first silent feature film from Iran, the comedy *Abi va Rabi* ([Abi and Rabi], Ovanes Ohanian, 1930), was released when 'talkies' had already spread across North America and Western Europe; many other silent films were produced well into the 1940s in the Soviet Union and in Asia, as testified by the Chinese feature *Mitu de gaoyang* ([Lost Lambs] or [Lost Children], Cai Chusheng, 1936) and by Semyon Timoshenko's comedy *Nebesnyi tikhokhod* ([Slow Flyer], 1946), released as a silent in 1947. Films with no soundtrack continued to be made throughout the rest of the twentieth century, and they still are to this day, but they are 'silent' only in a heavily mediated sense of the term. The 'specificity' of cinema's first thirty years was in fact almost identical to that of a magic lantern show, another performing art involving optics (the image carrier), mechanics (the projection apparatus), one or more technicians in attendance, one or more artists or lecturers in the proximity of a screen, and an architectural space where 'animated views' were presented to audiences. Other pieces of equipment such as gramophone players or automated sound devices were also employed on many occasions, but the nature of the spectacle was essentially the same, as it demanded a coordinated effort to make machines and people work in perfect synchrony for the entire duration of the programme. When optical sound was applied to the film stock, cinema did not cease to be a performance; it only changed its instrumentation.

The first objective of this book is to describe and explain – in necessarily broad terms – how silent cinema came into being and found its expression through a sequence of activities and events that included the manufacture of cellulose stock with a photographic emulsion, the operation of machines for recording and exhibiting moving images, the production of dramatic or non-fictional works expressly made or adapted for the screen, and

their collective experience in theatrical or domestic settings (space constraints have assigned all too brief roles here to animation, industrial, ethnographic, amateur, scientific, avant-garde, and educational filmmaking, but they are all integral to the narration). This process incessantly evolved in various communities and industries around the world, taking the form of many different creative methods, technologies, financial schemes, and social values, too diverse and too complex to be expounded within the boundaries of a single introductory volume. In the name of brevity, generalities are given here priority over details about national contexts; on the other hand, no single formula on broader subjects like human rights, religion, gender, race, politics, ethnicity, welfare, and other social issues can be pigeonholed into a non-existent silent film era of identical shape in all continents and countries at all times (for example, cruelty to animals and pollution were rarely denounced in motion picture shows of the early twentieth century; one of the few surviving films on these topics, a documentary short made in the United States around 1923 – *Be Kind to Dumb Animals* – is not a flattering promotion of the cause). These and other themes will be encountered as small signposts throughout the text, brief reminders of how yesterday's world looked.

Silent cinema was one of the first global manifestations of modernity. The story told in the following pages is therefore international in its scope; France, the United States, and Great Britain are its main protagonists, because these countries were of crucial importance in raising and developing the technology, the industry, and the aesthetics of cinema. Italy, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Russia, and the Soviet Union also were major players in Europe, as were Japan, China, India, Australia, and New Zealand in the Asian continent and in the Pacific. South America was a significant marketplace for film distribution from abroad; much remains to be discovered about early

film exhibition in the Middle East and Africa, the almost exclusive expression of colonial powers.

The vast majority of surviving silent films are held by private and public collecting institutions around the world; because of this, a substantial portion of this book is dedicated to what these institutions do, and how they can contribute to a better knowledge of silent cinema. The words 'archive' and 'museum' will often be used interchangeably, but they refer to very different ways of looking at cultural artefacts. Film museums and archives should not be confused with film libraries: by and large, archives are concerned with cinema as a document of history, with the archivist providing the conceptual and practical tools for the on-site consultation of the objects – generally by appointment – in specially equipped rooms; libraries are focused on the users, who should feel free to browse the collections at any time with little or no supervision, except where warranted by the rarity and fragility of the items. Most museums have dedicated areas for scholarly research as well (also by appointment), but they take a more selective approach to the acquisition and exhibition of film collections. These activities are primarily driven by curators, who are responsible for choosing what to acquire and show to the public, in accordance with specific collection policies. The digital marketplace has somehow blurred these distinctions, but their essence remains valid to this day. There are no such things as 'archival books', or 'archival paintings': the very concept of 'archival cinema' must also be questioned, as it implicitly dictates a content-driven approach to film culture.

Rather than following a strictly chronological or geographical order, the chapters of this volume are structured in a narrative sequence where history is initially read backwards, from the present to the invention of cinema. The book opens with a brief survey of the consumption of

silent films as digital facsimiles: their analysis is followed by an outline of their material, technological, and cultural provenance, which represents one of the core objectives of this work. The actual story begins in Chapter 2 with a flashback to the late 1890s, when flexible strips of cellulose were chosen as the preferred carriers of consecutive photographic images. Colour film, and the optical or chemical processes used to expand its chromatic range, is the subject of Chapter 3; Chapter 4 examines the apparatus – cameras, lights, processing equipment, projectors – used to make and exhibit motion pictures. Chapter 5 presents the individuals who operated these machines and saw them in action; Chapter 6 explores the physical spaces where these activities took place. Chapter 7 is an overview of the films produced and exhibited in the silent era. Their principal themes and genres are only briefly mentioned in relation to the cultural, financial, legal, and material factors influencing the creation and reception of the works, in their countries of origin and elsewhere.

How these works were actually presented in motion picture houses is the subject of Chapter 8, where the main aspects of a typical show are sketched out, from the audience's arrival in the theatre to the unfolding of the cinematic performance and its intermissions. Chapter 9 is dedicated to the live, recorded, or automated sounds produced while the projection was taking place. After the film has been exhibited for the last time as a commercial product, the second half of its material biography begins to unfold. Its salient phases are explained in Chapter 10, from the deliberate or accidental destruction of film prints to their rescue by individuals and institutions committed to prolonging their useful life and to learning more about their past adventures. The results of this detective work, as illustrated in Chapter 11, constitute the body of evidence drawn upon in scholarly works about silent

cinema. To secure the permanent availability of salvaged films for present and future generations, museum and archive curators oversee the duplication of these vulnerable objects; Chapter 12 describes the basic methods adopted in this process. The cumulative damages and alterations suffered by film prints, and the remedies applied with analogue and digital techniques for the sake of their preservation, are assessed in Chapter 13. The last two chapters are devoted to the practice and theory of curatorial work: Chapter 14 provides advice on how to handle, observe, and study original and duplicate copies of silent films; Chapter 15 is a discussion of the main principles and questions pertaining to the collection, preservation, and public exhibition of silent cinema as a cultural phenomenon.

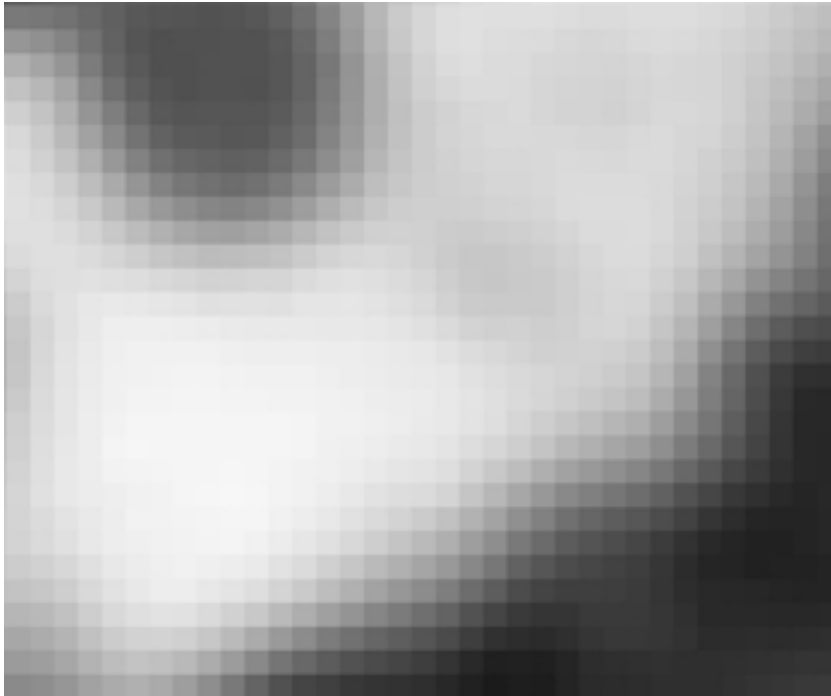
Many of these principles can be profitably applied to the study of cinematic works in general: for many decades after the end of the so-called 'silent era', films continued to be made, distributed, and exhibited in essentially the same way as they had been for much of the first three decades of the twentieth century, the only difference being that live performers in the vicinity of the screen were an ancillary option rather than a requirement. Nevertheless, silent cinema occupies a very special place in the history of the visual arts. In symbolic terms, it is an intermediate milestone between Plato's cave (moving images made and exhibited without machines) and digital technology, where human labour is reduced to a minimum in the image capturing process, and virtually to nil in the course of theatrical exhibition, once the equipment has been programmed and calibrated. Georges Méliès' ambition to make cinema through 'artificially arranged scenes' (as he called them in his memoirs) has become a common occurrence in the early twenty-first century; it is only fitting to evoke his name as

our mentor in the voyage we are about to undertake in the following pages, from post-digital cinema to 'pre-cinema' (otherwise called 'early popular visual culture') and back. Arbitrary as it is, like all subdivisions of historic time into discrete periods, 'silent cinema' is a useful term of reference as the beginning of a trajectory leading from one kind of artificiality to another.

Silent cinema was a tiny seismic episode in the geology of visual arts, but had long-term repercussions of much greater magnitude than at the time of its emergence at the end of the nineteenth century. This can be best appreciated by simply considering how Méliès' primordial 'animated views' have morphed into such pervasive features of our everyday lives that a large portion of humanity seems to be taking their existence for granted. Nevertheless, we can and should be able to live without moving image technology. For a brief period of time, cinema didn't even need electricity in order to exist. Motion pictures were projected with other kinds of light sources, only slightly more sophisticated than those available in 1946 to the Bedouin shepherds who discovered seven scrolls of precious manuscripts in a cave along the cliffs of the Dead Sea. In all their humble beauty and inherent transience, silent films are the parchment scrolls of cinema; looking at them, directly or through suitable duplicates, may help our understanding of one of the greatest mysteries of the human mind, aptly summarized by experimental filmmaker and writer Stefan Themerson in an evocative phrase: 'the urge to create visions'. The 'artificially arranged scenes' described here did not see the light only by virtue of celluloid strips, or machines, or screens, or people, but because of their unique coexistence in an organic whole. In this book, we will call these collective visions 'cinematic events'.

# Chapter 1

## Pixels



**Fig. 2** Enlarged view of 1,000 pixels in a frame of *Le Voyage dans la lune* (Georges Méliès, 1902) from a digital copy in 2K resolution. Source: Private collection.

*Le Voyage dans la lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*, 1902) is one of the most celebrated works produced in the silent film era. Its director, Georges Méliès, proudly considered it the crowning achievement of his career. The film was reproduced in all the major formats and media devised since the invention of cinema, so numerous that it is impossible to tell how many copies are in existence around the world. A large number of them were made with the same techniques used by Méliès

in the early 1900s. Many were destroyed over the course of the years. The more we go back in time, the fewer extant copies we find of this cinematic milestone: at least twenty-five film archives, museums, and private collections have 35mm or 16mm duplicates of this title, but only one print created under the filmmaker's direct supervision is known to survive. On the other hand, *A Trip to the Moon* is everywhere, readily accessible from as many pieces of digital equipment as those in use

across the globe. The quantitative gap between the single remaining print manufactured in 1902 and the billions of virtual replicas available today is too wide to be ignored. This numerical curve can be turned into a story. It is the moral tale of why silent cinema is both ubiquitous and endangered, a commodity and a treasure, depending on how we look at it.

Most viewers of the twenty-first century have encountered *A Trip to the Moon* for the first time on a small digital screen. They are probably aware that it was originally shown on a much larger one, but generally assume that all the people who viewed it had the same kind of experience: the mad scientist, the rocket in the moon's eye, the selenite monsters, the expedition's triumph after a perilous adventure at the bottom of the sea. It is also taken for granted that moving images produced at the time of Méliès were of uneven quality because that is how cinema was back then, a technology so primitive that, for instance, human movement could only be reproduced at a faster speed than in reality. As we discover that more than one version of *A Trip to the Moon* can be seen in digital form, however, the notion that a silent film is always one and the same is brought into question.

Some reproductions of Méliès' film are better than their siblings. One is in colour, another in black and white. This image was cropped, that one wasn't. There are different title cards at the beginning of the film, depending on which version is being viewed. Images are sharper here than they are there. This version runs a bit slower than the other one. There are at least two possible explanations for such discrepancies: either the reproductions were made with different techniques, possibly at a higher or lower resolution, or we have been looking at different things, with no other connection to each other than a title, a storyline, and a sequence of events captured by one or more cameras. A single strip of negative was used for

*A Trip to the Moon*, but there are other films by Méliès where the same shot appears to have been taken with two lenses at slightly different angles, depending on the copy we are looking at.

It is perfectly normal not to pay any attention to these incongruities, because we don't have to. When searching for *A Trip to the Moon* on the Internet in our leisure time, it is enough to choose one of the colour versions, obeying a natural impulse towards chromatic realism, but for all we know the film may have been originally shown only in black and white, then somehow colourized at a later time. It is only when we start formulating such conjectures that the small rectangle in front of us becomes a window to another era, to a visual culture that existed not so long ago and yet seems so incredibly remote. We are looking at the facsimile of a silent film. We may decide to find out more about it, in which case the replica suddenly becomes a potential vestige of something else. *A Trip to the Moon* had been shown in many projection rooms, to many collective audiences around the world. The screenings may have been accompanied by music. The images may have looked sharper. The film may have made a different, maybe stronger, impression on its public in 1902; that may still be the case today, if some of these conditions could be met or at least approximated. This intellectual leap of faith is very easy to achieve with other forms of artistic expression; less so with silent cinema.

## Facsimiles

The vast majority of us have seen a famous painting for the first time in the form of a photograph, then maybe in its original incarnation on a visit to a museum. We may have listened to the recording of a great symphony, and liked it so much that we couldn't wait to hear it again in a live concert, if at all possible. A documentary on the Alhambra

palace in Granada may have been so intriguing that we decided to make Spain our next holiday destination. This kind of impulse is rarely felt with cinema, for two good reasons: first, because it is commonly believed that – contrary to the above examples – a film has no ‘original’ to speak of, therefore there is no intrinsic difference between our digital Méliès and its theatrical avatar, other than the size or the sharpness of the picture, with the possible extra gratification of watching it in the company of a large crowd. The other reason is that most people feel no particular need to see *A Trip to the Moon* – or, for that matter, any film – on the big screen in order to fully appreciate it. In addition to this, digital reproductions enable us to study the film in much greater detail by stopping, slowing down, and enlarging portions of the image at will; we can select, reassemble, and replay individual shots or entire sequences in order to better examine their structure; we can readjust the chromatic balance, or even see the film in black and white if we so prefer.

The second part of this line of argument is not only perfectly valid, but also entirely consistent with how people have studied painting, music, and architecture since reproduction techniques were employed in their respective areas of interest. For many generations, photographs and sound recordings have enriched the lives of millions of women, men, and children who would otherwise never have been able to visit a museum or a concert hall. Art history and music are taught and learned at the highest academic levels in the most remote areas of the planet, and no one would question the revolutionary effect of new technologies in the education sector. These tools have also been very beneficial to the study of cinema; this is especially true in the case of silent films, because of their negligible value as commercial products (except for a small minority of ‘greatest hits’).

Had it not been for digital resources, the first three decades of film history would have remained the playground for a tiny minority of scholars and hardcore cinephiles. Access to archival collections in digital formats has been no less important for film archives and museums, whose preservation work had previously received scant attention outside specialized festivals and academic conferences. Last but not least, films of the early period are now inspiring or being recycled for the creation of entirely new works. Silent cinema is reconnected with the present, bridging what once looked like an insurmountable gap between the spectators and their own visual history.

The main motivation for not venturing beyond the digital experience of silent cinema – the alleged lack of a theatrical ‘aura’ in motion pictures – is more problematic. Much as it is hailed as a powerful form of aesthetic expression, cinema has always been perceived as an art of reproduction; its legitimacy as a cultural phenomenon was therefore hampered by the very nature of the technology that made it possible in the first place. The fact that cinema is also an industry further reinforced the prejudice that accompanied its irresistible growth over much of the twentieth century. The importance of this variable, however, should not be overestimated. Music, architecture, theatre, and all the other fine arts, not to mention literature, are industries as well; their productions are normally the results of projects that are commissioned, marketed, and paid for by their respective clients. There may be a difference in the size of the financial investments required for their creation, but no art form is qualitatively ranked in quantitative terms: great novels and great songs can be distributed in huge numbers, and make large amounts of money. Attending a concert, a stage play, an opera, or a gallery exhibition is one thing; a film is apparently something else. The ‘aura’ just isn’t there.