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COLLECTING FILM AT YALE

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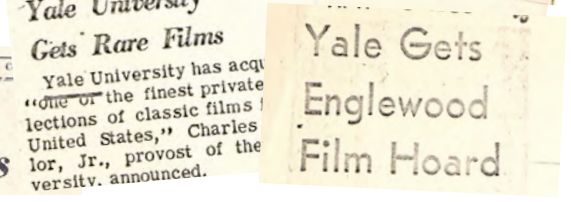
An Evening of Silent Films from the Yale Collection of Classic Films



With Live Accompaniment by Donald Sosin

**Friday, February 23
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Paul L. Joskow '70 M.Phil., '72 Ph.D.



207 Titles, Mostly Silents

Yale Acquires Collection Of Classic Films

Celebrating Fifty Years of Collecting Film at Yale

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John Griggs

By Leonard Maltin, age 14 (1965)

About two years ago I read about a film company in Englewood—the town right next to Teaneck, where I lived—being operated by a man named John Griggs. I telephoned Mr. Griggs and discovered that he was an actor; the film business was just a sideline. Over the telephone his voice sounded very cultured, perhaps British. I spoke with him several weeks in a row and one Friday evening he asked me over to see a film. I asked if I might bring along a friend. “Bring over a whole gang,” he replied enthusiastically.

His house was obscured from view on Maple Street by trees and two brick posts on either side of a gravel driveway. My friends and I were greeted at the door of his stately, Victorian home by his charming wife and a frisky little dog. We were escorted into the Griggs’ basement-theater. Mr. Griggs greeted us in the darkened room; he explained that the film on the screen was just ending and told us to have a seat. The room had four rows of seats. The back row consisted of four comfortable chairs, and the other three had long wooden benches. We watched the climax of *Suds*, a Mary Pickford film. When the lights went on, we were introduced to Mr. Griggs’ departing guest, Walter Kerr, and then got a chance to scrutinize the basement and see what Mr. Griggs himself looked like.

He was a heavy-set man with a distinguished-looking face; the effect was heightened by a bushy mustache. He smoked a pipe and his casual dress contrasted his stately appearance and voice. I later discovered that he was raised in the Midwest, and the voice was the result of years of acting. John Griggs’ first encounter with the movies was as a piano player for his local theater while still a teenager. He came to New York and established himself as an actor on the stage (where he made twenty-five appearances on Broadway) and on radio. Later he acted in television, which has been his mainstay for the past few years. He had running roles in the original Jackie Gleason and Joey Bishop series and occasional parts in many other programs. Most recently he has been involved with commercial work; for over a year he has been the voice on the Chase Manhattan Bank commercials. In the thirties he began collecting films and his collection today is one of the most extensive in the country. His entry into the home movie field—making prints of his films for collectors—was an attempt to recoup some of the money invested in his hobby.

The wall of the projection booth was reserved for autographs of distinguished guests. Among the names: Buster Keaton, Lillian and Dorothy Gish, Vivien Leigh, Jason Robards Jr., and Marlon Brando. The other walls were decorated with movie memorabilia: posters for *THE INFORMER* with Victor McLaglen, *THE EAGLE* with Rudolph Valentino, *THE BIRTH OF A NATION*, and many movie stills. That evening we viewed a rented film, *A NIGHT TO REMEMBER*. In between reels we gazed in awe at the material adorning the walls.

For over a year we visited Mr. Griggs regularly. It was not uncommon for him to call on a Friday or Saturday night and invite me over “with the whole gang” for movies. I think he enjoyed having us for an audience

for both him and his films. We saw Doug Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, Ronald Colman, D.W. Griffith, Lon Chaney, and many other marvelous film masters. He told us of his forthcoming home movie releases and often previewed them for us, letting us have the “scoop” on the other film magazines. He enjoyed my fanzine *Profile* but told us to “find ourselves.” At the time we had a variety of material in every issue with no particular topic. When we switched to an all-movie format and printed photos on our covers, he had very kind words for us and took out a complimentary advertisement in one issue.

In the summer of 1964 he discovered that he had lung cancer. He underwent surgery late in the year and appreciated a movie-oriented get well card we sent him. We saw very little of him for a few months. Then, one night in December, he called us over on the spur of the moment for a screening. We saw a William S. Hart western and some other films, then at 11:30 he pulled out a print he had borrowed of *MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY* with Clark Gable and Charles Laughton. Ordinarily we stayed at Mr. Griggs’ house till all hours of the morning without worry since he would drive us home. But this night wasn’t long after his operation and we had to get a ride home ourselves. After looking at the first reel of the classic film, we told him that we would have to leave in order to get a lift from one of our parents. He seemed mad, or hurt, or maybe both. “But you haven’t seen the mutiny!” he said emphatically. Within a few minutes we were forgiven, because of the hour.

That was not the first time we had seen him angry. His film sales were never very high, for a number of reasons. Most of the films he could put out legally were already on the market, being in the public domain, and some of his personal favorites were not of wide interest. (He had great fondness for Henry B. Walthall and Reginald Denny, for instance.) While driving us home he would often complain about his plight. “Chaplin! That’s all they want, Chaplin! And the *PHANTOM OF THE OPERA*!” It was sad that more people didn’t realize the value of the lesser-known titles he did release. Some of them were just as enjoyable as the classics, and some were even better.

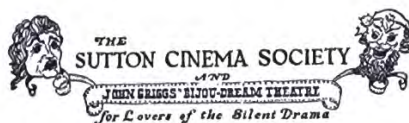
That December night in 1964 was the last time I visited John Griggs. Every few weeks I call him to talk about films, but he has lost a lot of his verve. He had another operation which took practically everything out of him and has kept him home for months. He is very pessimistic about his health. I try to encourage him, but he complains, “I haven’t gotten any damn better in the past three months,” which I know for a fact is not true. His wife has told me that he has been walking their dog (he could hardly stand up for a long time) and he even sounds better on the phone.

I certainly hope he recovers sufficiently to lead a normal life again. I miss our visits and engaging conversations. He is one of the most interesting people I have ever met.

John Griggs died two years after this piece was written, in 1967.

RIGHT: Letterhead from a poster advertising one of Griggs’ screenings in the late 1950s.

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FILM COLLECTION

This Collection of Old Movies is a Hobby. Available for private showing.

Tonight's Films

Rescued from an Eagle's Nest
(Dir. Edwin S. Porter and J. Searle Dawley, 1908, 6 min.)
The acting debut of D.W. Griffith, this short made for the Biograph Company also stars Henry B. Walthall, one of John Griggs' favorite actors.

Gaumont Graphic 1918
(1918, 13 mins.)
With an American office in Flushing, Long Island, Gaumont Graphic released a new newsreel every Friday for many years. This compilation features stories including Mary Pickford greeting returning soldiers, and women in Venice, California, selling War Savings Stamps, assisted by elephants.

The Balloonatic
(Dir. Edward F. Cline and Buster Keaton, 1923, 22 min.)
Produced by Keaton's own Buster Keaton Productions and released by First National Pictures, THE BALLOONATIC was one of 19 two-reel comedies Keaton made between 1920 and 1923.

The Mark of Zorro
(Dir. Fred Niblo, 1920, 90 min.)
The first film released through the newly-formed United Artists, THE MARK OF ZORRO was the first film adaptation to feature the character of Zorro, created the year before by American novelist Johnston McCulley. The film helped establish the swashbuckler genre and made Fairbanks a superstar.

BELOW: The front-page article from the Yale Daily News announcing the arrival of the Griggs Collection, April 5, 1968.

207 Titles, Mostly Silents

Yale Acquires Collection Of Classic Films



Standish D. Lawder, assistant professor of history of art, was largely responsible for bringing the Griggs Collection of Classic Films to Yale. He has been named curator of the collection.

By REID DETCHON

Yale has begun its own film archives by acquiring the Griggs Collection of Classic Films, Provost Charles Taylor announced yesterday.

One of the finest private collections of classic films in the country, the Griggs Collection contains 207 titles, most of them silent films shot in the twenties. Virtually every major American film-maker up to 1940 is represented.

Prior to the acquisition Yale had no permanent collection of its own and depended on rentals, mostly from New York's Museum of Modern Art, for teaching purposes.

The collection was obtained from Mrs. Mary N. Griggs, mother of Timothy Griggs, 1964. Three alumni provided the funds necessary for purchase: Fred W. Beinecke, 1966; Richard E. Fuller and Chester J. LaRoche Jr., both 1918.

Film Council Established

Taylor also announced the establishment of the University Film Council, an informal coordinating board to advise on programs of film study and film-making at Yale.

Standish D. Lawder, assistant professor of history of art, was named curator of the collection. Lawder, who teaches a course on the history and art of cinema, was largely responsible for bringing the collection to Yale.

Spencer M. Berger, one of the country's leading authorities on the film career of the Barrymores, and the owner of an extensive private collection himself, will serve through the Yale Library as an advisor to the newly-created Yale Film Collection. Berger also played a key role in the acquisition of the Griggs Collection, Lawder said yesterday.

The collection was assembled by the late John Griggs, a former movie actor and dealer in classic films, whose hobby was collecting and screening the films for his friends and neighbors in Englewood, N.J.

(continued on page 3)



Early film directors' penchant for the spectacular is reflected in this scene from Fritz Lang's classic, "Metropolis," one of 207 films Yale has acquired in the Griggs Collection, considered one of the finest private collections in the country.

(continued from page 1)

According to Berger, Griggs "never strove for a rounded collection in the historical sense, but his personal interests and enthusiasms were so broad that he inevitably wound up with one of the largest and most worthwhile personal collections I know of."

The core of the collection is in the American film. D.W. Griffith's monumental "Birth of a Nation" of 1916 documents the beginning of the narrative film, and other titles by Griffith (including "Intolerance") provide a comprehensive survey of his work.

Fairbanks, Chaplin

There are a number of films of Douglas Fairbanks and also some of Charlie Chaplin, including several important one-reelers of the early days. Among them are "Easy Street," "A Dog's Life," "Shoulder Arms," and "The Gold Rush."

Other key figures in the American silent comedy — Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Mack Sennett — are represented by a total of 14 films.

The collection also includes:

- early Westerns by William S. Hart ("Tumbleweeds") and James Cruze ("The Covered Wagon");
- horror films by Lon Chaney ("The Phantom of the Opera," "The Hunchback of Notre Dame");
- sophisticated night-club comedies by Raymond Griffith; and
- serious dramatic films by John Barrymore ("Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde"), and Erich von Stroheim.

Lawder also cites 50 or more films as belonging to the American genre category, i.e., American films emanating from Hollywood which were typical of their time.

20 Foreign Films

The 20 foreign films in the collection represent "a superb sampling of the early European and Russian cinema," according to Lawder. "Potemkin" and "Ten Days That Shook the World" document Sergei Eisenstein's work, and Fritz Lang is represented by "Metropolis."



The American film classic, "Salome" (1922), was an attempt to bring the art nouveau rhythm of Aubrey Beardsley to the screen. Above is a scene with the star, the dancer Nazimova.

The collection also includes 150 taped musical scores prepared by Griggs to accompany the silents, as well as a number of old slides of movie theater notices, slide projectors, lobby display photographs, posters, and movie memorabilia.

The condition of the Griggs Collection is excellent, according to Lawder; Berger also testifies to Griggs' "passion for quality." Many of the prints are taken from the original negatives. Lawder says reprints will be made for preservation purposes once funds become available.

Film Study Center

The question of access to the films is still undecided. Lawder says he would like to see a Film Study Center established so that students could consult films just as they now do books, but at present Yale has nothing approaching the necessary funds or facilities.

Lawder says he will be the most frequent user of the collection at first with his film history and modern art courses. But he emphasizes the collection was "not a History of Art Department acquisition by any means," adding the films could be used for a variety of disciplines, including history, sociology, and American studies.

'Provincial Insularity'

Film-making courses will also take considerable advantage of the collection. Lawder blames the inaccessibility of films for "so much of the provincial insularity that plagues new film-makers. The incredible riches of the Griggs Collection will open the students' eyes to the storehouse of the past and the widely varied means of filmic expression it contains."

The History of the Yale Collection of Classic Films

BY BRIAN MEACHAM

In a report dated August 30, 1967, Standish Lawder, then Assistant Professor of the History of Art at Yale, described why he thought the university should seize an opportunity to acquire a collection of 207 films on 16mm, assembled over a twenty-year period by the late actor and film collector John Griggs: “The incredible riches of the Griggs Collection will open the students’ eyes to the storehouse of the past and the widely varied means of filmic expression it contains.” Lawder listed four specific uses—“Courses in film-history,” “Courses in the Art School,” “Courses in the Drama School,” and “Film elsewhere in Yale College”—that would benefit from the university having its own “archive of historic films.”

In an age before home video helped make older films easier to see outside of what Lawder calls “institutionalized film archives,” in order to be able to screen film in classes, the university would have to “rent films in large quantity, mostly from the Museum of Modern Art.” Lawder suggested that acquiring the Griggs Collection would to some extent free the university from this practice, and would also enable “students themselves...to study certain films in depth, through repeated screenings, at their own convenience.”

Lawder describes the broad variety contained in the relatively compact collection, one “shaped by personal tastes and a passion for quality...The core of the collection is in the American film. There virtually every major American film-maker up to about 1940 is represented by important examples.” Films directed by Griffith, Chaplin, Keaton, von Stroheim, and Sennett are here, and films starring Fairbanks, Lloyd, William S. Hart, John Barrymore, and Rudolph Valentino could all be found in the original collection of 207 titles. The collection also included what Lawder called “American genre film, that is, films of lesser known directors whose work is typical of the average American film of their time,” to which he assigned “considerable sociological as well as aesthetic value.” Some of these films are found listed under “MISCELLANEOUS AMERICAN FEATURES” on the last two pages of Lawder’s collection summary, and include de Mille’s *YANKEE CLIPPER*, *ELLA CINDERS* starring Colleen Moore, *NEVADA* starring Gary Cooper, and *MICKEY* starring Mabel Normand. Lawder ends his introduction with the following potent claim: “Harvard presently has a collection of some 65 titles. Yale at present has none.”

The previous spring, the *New York Times* published a piece titled “Yale to Offer Class About Films in Fall” that described Lawder’s upcoming course, “The History and Art of Cinema,” as “the university’s first.” The article closed with a list of films to be covered in the course, three of which, *THE BIRTH OF A NATION*, *THE GOLD RUSH*, and *BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN*, would be acquired as part of the Griggs Collection.

Acquiring the Griggs Collection also had support from a number of faculty members at Yale, including Alvin Eisenman, founder and head of the Yale School of Art’s program in graphic design, who wrote “The Griggs Collection is an excellent beginning for what should in time become an important and complete teaching collection to be compared with Yale’s holding in, say, painting.” Robert Brustein, Dean of the Yale School of Drama, wrote that “no university worth its name should be without such materials,” which would be important for the “training of actors and directors.”

The Films

The list, titled “THE JOHN GRIGGS COLLECTION” (and with a somewhat specious subheading claiming, “The prints are in 16 mm, in perfect condition”), lists the films not in alphabetical or chronological order, but in a kind of film-canonical hierarchy, beginning, predictably, with the films of D.W. Griffith. Next are works starring Douglas Fairbanks, followed by the comedies of Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd, in that order, then films featuring Mary Pickford, Greta Garbo, and directed by James Cruze.



John Griggs in costume for his role as town crier on the 1950s ABC-TV show *America’s Town Meeting of the Air*. PHOTO COURTESY LEONARD MALTIN

Page three continues with Valentino, Harry Langdon, and Raymond Griffith, while page 4 contains “MISCELLANEOUS CLASSICS (AMERICAN)” and “FOREIGN CLASSICS,” including the films of Eisenstein, Murnau, Bunuel, Dreyer, Lang, and Rossellini. The final two pages of the list contain the films of Mack Sennett as well as “MISCELLANEOUS AMERICAN FEATURES,” “BRITISH FEATURES,” and “ADDITIONAL SHORTS,” including a tantalizing note referring to an unidentified “dozen more miscellaneous silent shorts.”

The acquisition made headlines around the country. Many papers, like the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the *Washington Daily News*, led with the seeming incongruity of this collection of popular culture heading to an esteemed institution of higher learning, with the *Sun-Times* announcing “Chaplin, Keaton, Valentino Going To Yale—On Film.”

Afterlife

Writing in the first issue of the Yale Film Associates’ newsletter in 1969, Spencer Berger YC ’40 reflected on the acquisition of the Griggs Collection. “Yale had been virtually without a film archive. Over-night it attained an enviable position with this fine variety of subjects, which today enrich a number of courses throughout the University.” By 1970, the collection was being referred to as the “Yale Collection of Classic Films,” and was being utilized for weekly public screenings in Hastings Hall in the Art & Architecture Building.

In the late 1970s, Associate Professor of the History of Art Donald Crafton became the caretaker of the collection. In a 1978 memo in the Spencer Berger Collection at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Crafton notes that since the Griggs acquisition, the collection “has grown to almost 400 titles.” In September, 1982, the Yale Film Study Center was founded, with Crafton as its first director and the Yale Collection of Classic Films under its care.

Today, fifty years after the Griggs Collection arrived, the Film Study Center holds more than 6,000 titles on film, in 35mm as well as 16mm, and in the form of original negatives and new preservation masters in addition to screening prints. As of 2018, the Film Study Center has identified 109 items presently in its collection definitively originating in the original Griggs Collection, with an additional 56 titles matching those on the Griggs list, likely (but not certain) to have arrived through the 1968 acquisition.

In addition to screening for Yale courses, the FSC’s film collection is shared through our Treasures from the Yale Film Archive screening series, through print loans to institutions around the world, and through film preservation projects to protect unique films. Tonight, we salute the visionaries responsible for planting the seeds, fifty years ago, for this collection and the work we do today.