

Programme of Danish Film Screenings at the Danish Institute at Athens

"Aspects of Danish Cinema".

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Film Screening on the 4th of December 2017

The Abyss (1910) directed by Urban Gad starring Asta Nielsen

The first 20 years of the twentieth century is a very crucial period in the history of International Cinema. This is the time where the essential elements of the language of cinema is created along with the entrance into Urban modernism and the beginning of the Industrial spreading of this dominating means of mass-entertainment to the city audiences. The creation of the silent movie period is the beginning of Cinema in Denmark.

The historical research by Paolo Cherchi Usai refers to the short period from 1910, where the Scandinavian countries - especially Sweden and Denmark - despite their rather small amount of inhabitants (less than 2.5 million inhabitants in Denmark in 1901) and little economic power, played an essential role in the development of the early cinema at an artistic and industrial level.

The establishment of the Danish Film company Nordisk in 1906 constituted a landmark as the second largest Film Company globally after the French Pathe and its studio is the largest cinematic studio in the world.

Danish pioneer directors such as Stellan Rye (*Studenten fra Pragh, 1913*) and Urban Gad, stand out dynamically with their new light techniques, as far as camera-placement and directing practices are concerned, creating a powerful aesthetic tradition that will influence Cinema world widely.

Nevertheless, it is not only movie directors, that stand out in Denmark in this period. It is the time of the entrance of the great actress Asta Nielsen (1881-1972) who proves to have international resonance. *The Abyss* (1910) directed by Urban Gad - the movie that we are going to watch today - became a huge success and established Astrid Nielsen as the first International star of Cinema ranging from Moscow to Rio de Janeiro. Film historian, Janet Bergstrøm stresses, that Astrid Nielsen's talent drew the audience into the cinema and changed the general opinion, that cinema was not an artistic genre. Her personal style in every performance attracted the crowds all over the world and gave her huge acknowledgment (Bergstrøm, Smith edition 1997)

In this movie, Nielsen incarnates the vampire in her own personal style as the archetype femme fatale, destroying not only men but also herself with her love (Michelides 1979). This is going to be the style of the rapidly developing American Cinema with its Hollywood productions, creating the charm of Classic Cinema based on female seduction.

In the movie "The Abyss", the audience admires the expressive face and the physical grace of the protagonist. This is a huge change to the earlier spasmodic and excessive movements of the actors of mute cinema. The erotic dance by the female actor in which she ties up the body of her lover and rotates aesthetically around him, expresses in a direct and original way the exposure of female desire. In her decision to run away with the circus artist and thereby to

follow her erotic passion by rejecting the conventional relationship with a wealthy young urban man, she manifests herself as an "unconventional" hero who does not obey to class barriers or sexual discrimination. Nevertheless, the patriarchal logic of cinema requires the punishment of the independent and disobedient female for her violations (Mulvey. 1975/1979, Kaplan 1983).

According to Lotte Eisner, a historic in German Expressionism, "nobody ever managed to compare with Asta Nielsen who always remained herself and never changed, which was probably the reason why Hollywood never showed interest in her – knowing that she could never transform" (Lotte Eisner, 1987).

The looks of Astrid Nielsen with her pale face and huge flaming eyes gave her a great variety of roles (woman of the bourgeoisie, circus artist, gypsy, journalist, feminist and androgynist) in a line of movies, mainly directed by her first husband Urban Gad. The highlight of her career is her outstanding interpretation of Hamlet (Hamlet 1921), directed by Svend Gade. Her performance in *Vanina* (1922) directed by Arthur von Gerlach and *Joyless Street* (1925) directed by G.W. Pabst are some of the cinematic creations that showed Nielsen as an ideal of the unstable, sophisticated and innovative era of promising liberation (Athanasatou in Adamou`s edition, 2008).

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