

FIAF CONGRESS, LONDON - 2000 AD
THE LAST NITRATE PICTURE SHOW

Dear Colleagues, Dear Friends of Film History,

As a parallel activity to the proposed Symposium *The Last Nitrate Picture Show*, the organisers of the FIAF Congress to be held in London in the year 2000 have agreed to revive the idea of a publication to honour and commemorate cellulose nitrate - the material that made cinema possible. Some of you will remember that I proposed such a publication as part of the 'Centenary of Cinema' celebrations of the mid-1990s, and several of you offered help with the project at that stage. We were not able to complete the nitrate tribute then, but we have another and better chance now. Please try to help this dream become reality.

To make such a publication worthwhile - to make it truly international, and truly representative of film and cinema culture in the broadest sense - it needs the widest possible participation. Please act on this appeal yourselves, but please also show it to all the colleagues who work in your institution, to film historians or enthusiasts, to veterans of film production, processing, distribution and projection in your country, and to anyone you think might be able to help. In short, please make known the existence of this project as widely as possible, and please encourage anybody with ideas to contact the address given below.

A proposed outline for the book, with some examples of what might be suitable contributions, is given on the following pages. What is particularly necessary at the moment are suggestions for the anthology and miscellany chapters: stories about nitrate disasters, stories about working with nitrate, nitrate-related anecdotes and folklore, and nominations for the proposed bibliography and filmography. Please do not assume that any candidate anecdote, book or film is "so obvious" that you do not need to mention it - it is much better to have the same idea nominated a dozen times than to risk losing it altogether!

The publication also needs pictorial material: remember to nominate photographs, cartoons, line-drawings, etc. as well as text.

Please send a photocopy or transcript of each suggestion (a reference alone is not enough) and remember to include a clear indication of its source. If it is a published anecdote, then the full details of the publication should be supplied, as copyright issues will have to be cleared. If you are supplying a memory of your own, then please add a note saying that you are willing to have the story published, and saying how you wish to be cited. If the story concerned is one given to you by a third party in a letter or taped interview, or found by you in a paper or sound archive, then it will be necessary to know that the originator or custodian of the story will also agree to its publication.

The publication will probably be an English language one, but suggestions may also be made in French, German or Spanish. If your source is in a language other than these four, please try to supply a translation.

Suggestions should ideally be in our hands by the end of 1998: it will be essential to have by then at least an idea of how well the project is going, so that we can finalise plans for the publication. Until we establish a formal editorial committee, I am representing the Congress organisers in this matter, so the name, address, and other contact points are

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Please give this project your support, and please bring it to the attention of other potential supporters. We can make it happen, but only with your help. Thank you in advance.

Sincerely



FIAF NITRATE CELEBRATION BOOK: DRAFT OUTLINE

1. THE "WHY ?" AND "WHY NOT ?" OF NITRATE

A section of five chapters exploring:

- a. Where cellulose nitrate came from, its structure and characteristics
- b. What made cellulose nitrate the "right stuff" for early cinematographers
- c. The shortcomings of nitrate as a working and archival medium
- d. Nitrate in contexts other than film and cinema
- e. A chapter pointing out the shortcomings of the successor materials

2. WORKING WITH NITRATE

A compilation - derived from oral history interviews and written accounts where available - of personal reminiscences from laboratory staff, cameramen, projectionists, production crews, etc. about life in the film industry in the nitrate era. This could be continued with anecdotes about people working with nitrate in archives ...

Sample entries:

Visits by the fire marshals were frequent and sometimes unpleasant. March of Time cutters operated at high speed and under great stress and were not always as cautious in handling the film as they should have been. On occasion, a \$10 or \$20 bill was passed to a fire inspector along with a blood oath to clean up the mess at once. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. By law, smoking was absolutely forbidden in the presence of nitrate; yet some workers smoked. Jack Glenn recalled turning around a corner on the second floor one day to find a city fire inspector giving a fierce tongue lashing to Roy Larsen, then publisher of Life magazine and a principal officer of the world's greatest publishing empire. Larsen had been caught, cigarette in his mouth, working in the midst of several thousand feet of nitrate. "I wouldn't give a God-damn if you were editor of the Saturday Evening Post," screamed the inspector, and Glenn didn't stay around to hear more.

(The March of Time 1935-1951 by Raymond Fielding (Oxford University Press, New York, 1978), p 213)

There was Jack Cotter, for instance, who was with Pathe before coming over to Movietone. Detailed to cover the total eclipse of the sun in 1927, Cotter's task was hampered by the fact that the average lens available at the time was a two-inch one. (Shooting from the Victoria Memorial, this would give a distant view of three quarters of Buckingham Palace. To-day's sixty-inch lens, used from the same position, would give a close-up of the Queen's head and shoulders as she stood on the balcony.) Jack searched around for a more powerful lens, hit upon the idea of borrowing a twenty-inch one from Greenwich Observatory, and went to Greenwich to shoot some test pictures of the sun with it. The lens was fine - except that it acted as a burning glass, and his £120 wooden camera, filled with highly inflammable film, burst into flames.

(Useless if Delayed by Paul Wyand (George G Harrap, London, 1959), p 42)

3. THE AESTHETICS OF NITRATE

A collection of essays from FIAF members (and others ?) about the intensity of their pleasure in viewing nitrate material. There could also be scope for anyone brave enough to write a "revisionist" view - saying perhaps that nitrate is more trouble than it is worth, or that the claims for its visual superiority are overstated.

4. THE COST OF NITRATE

A calendar of nitrate film fires - in theatres, laboratories, archives and elsewhere. This chapter would build on work already done by colleagues at the Filmoteca Generalitat Valenciana to list major film fires for the exhibition LA IMAGEN RESCATADA in 1992. There could now be added details of smaller-scale fires, as well as extracts from contemporary press coverage or official reports of the various major tragedies.

5. NITRATE FINDS AND LOSSES

A collection of stories from FIAF members about their "LAST FILM SEARCH" operations, "NITRATE WON'T WAIT" campaigns etc., with examples of successes - and failures. Stories could range from the Dawson City find all the way to stories about single cans of film

Sample entry:

In 1936 and again in 1937, Gaumont British News presented special commemorative copies of their newsreels of the Funeral of King George V and Coronation of George VI to every Royal Burgh in Scotland (about 10). Each set of newsreels was welded into a special shiny can with commemorative centre plaque, and was accompanied with a deed of gift which trumpeted that this was a gift in perpetuity, to the citizens of X Burgh, and that the cans were not to be opened until 2036. One such can of decomposing nitrate stored in the Manuscript room of the Burgh archives, was found wrapped in brown paper with the pencilled instructions "Not to be opened for 100 years!"

(Letter from Janet McBain, Scottish Film and Television Archive, Glasgow)

6. A NITRATE MISCELLANY

a. A collection of nitrate facts and legends - ranging from stories of the use of old nitrate film in special effects to legends and folklore (e.g. the use of shredded nitrate film as a substitute for gunpowder by bandits in India). A special category - which might be worth a separate sub-section, perhaps called NITRATE AUTEUR ? - could anthologise stories of episodes where studio or laboratory fires are supposed to have had a temporary or permanent effect on film history

Sample entries:

The classic anecdote about "For the Term of his Natural Life" (1927) is an apocryphal story which holds that, when Australasian films - and Director Norman Dawn - required shots of a ship at sea engulfed in flames, they procured a hulk and filled it liberally with waste oil and large amounts of nitrate film. In the dead of night, before the scene was shot and the ship was still (presumably) moored close to shore, an unidentified collector rowed out to the hulk and helped himself to unspecified quantities of film, bringing them back to shore and to who knows what hiding place before daybreak. The producers would, of course, be none the wiser. Next day the ship was towed out to sea, set alight, and made a spectacular sight for the cameras.

(letter from Ray Edmondson, National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra)

i. *Working first in Vienna, shooting twenty hours a day in three shifts, then at Isleworth, then Shepperton, and despite a fire in the cutting room which damaged some footage, Reed brought the film [The Third Man] in on time in March 1949.*

(The Man Between: a Biography of Carol Reed by Nicholas Wapshott (Chatto & Windus, London, 1990), p 232)

ii. *Just out of H.M. Forces 1948 and back to my old job as sound assistant in a sound studio in Wardour Street, one of our picture editors asked me if I'd like some extra money. The job was working nights at Shepperton Studios assembling seven reels of "THE THIRD MAN" lost in a cutting room fire. I would work on a sequence printed from the negative trying to match a frame of the sequence from the many takes reprinted. Not an easy job when 4,000 slates were taken and usually 3 or 4 takes on that slate number. After about three hours I was then taken off assembling, and given sequences from other editors who had managed to match takes with scenes. I was the only one on the shift who could use the "BELL & HOWELL" hot foot splicer. Sir Carol Reed would come along about 4AM and view in the theatre the night's work - the editor OSSIE HOFFENRICHTER would then take over on day shift and carry on with the final edit.*

(letter from Martin McLean of Ealing, West London)

- b. A nitrate bibliography: a list of books in which nitrate is relevant to the subject matter. The bibliography would not be restricted to technical manuals, but should also include (for example) novels in which nitrate film has an important role in the plot

Sample entries:

THE CINEMATOGRAPH BOOK: a Complete Practical Guide to the Taking and Projecting of Cinematograph Pictures edited by Bernard E. Jones (Cassell, London etc., Revised Edition 1919 after first publication in 1915)

From Chapter XIII: What to do if the Film Fires

The switching on of the auditorium lights gives the pianist the cue to continue playing, and so keeps the attention of the audience while the operator looks after their interests, although they would and should know nothing about it. Having put out the flame, which should be a mere nothing in a properly-constructed and well-cared-for machine, switch off the arc, and see that the film trap is clear. Then proceed, without losing a second of time, to thread in the remaining film, just as if nothing had happened, and go on with the show exactly as before the accident. (page 170)

THE SHATTERED HELMET by Franklin W. Dixon (Grosset & Dunlap, New York, 1973)

One of the 'Hardy Boys Mystery Stories' series. The plot revolves around an ancient Greek helmet, lent many years ago as a prop for a silent movie and subsequently lost. In the course of the action, the Boys track down a copy of the film and the bad guys start a nitrate fire to try to destroy it.

Buster had just started to examine the third reel when the house was shaken by a muffled roar. He put down the film and they all raced outside.

Black smoke billowed from the garage. An instant later the frame structure was engulfed in red flames.

"Good heavens, the film's blown up!" Buckles cried out. "Run for your lives!" His warning was hardly necessary, because the heat forced all of them back to a respectful distance. (page 114)

(suggested by Yvette Hackett, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa)

- c. A nitrate filmography: like the bibliography, a list of films in which the special characteristics of nitrate film play an important part in the story or argument of the film - for example, burning nitrate plays an important part at key moments in the plots of *Cinema Paradiso* (1988) and *Prague* (1992), though of course fire is not essential to the depiction of "film" from the nitrate era.

Sample entry:

LYRISCH NITRAAT (LYRICAL NITRATE) (Netherlands, 1990)

Colour; 1450 m (50 mins); comopt;
sound : (music and effects); titles : Dutch;
intertitles : Dutch

production	: YUCA Film
writer and director	: Peter Delpout
producer	: Suzanne van Voorst

A compilation of film fragments dating from the years 1905-1915, seeking to glorify this ancient material. Constructed like a musical composition, the film uses feature and documentary footage from the collection of Jean Desmet, the first Dutch film collector, which is currently being preserved by the Nederlands Filmmuseum.

Access : copyright YUCA Film; world sales Jane Balfour Films Ltd, Burghley House, 35 Fortress Road, London NW5 1AD, England.